Evaluation of the Impact of the Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience Enhancement Theme

Report

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Contents

Foreword

The Scottish Enhancement Themes have been running since 2003 and this report provides an evaluation of the most recent Theme, Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience, which launched in October 2017. It was an ambitious Theme from the outset. Its overall aim was 'to reflect on data available within the Scottish sector to help understand what the sector does well and what could be improved'.

Some of the key ambitions that were set out at the launch event were to:

- define the Scottish approach to evidence-based enhancement
- take advantage of the unique Scottish context of collaboration to influence practice beyond Scotland
- develop a sector-wide approach to engaging students in looking at, understanding and using data to enhance their overall academic experience
- present a core date/evidence set for the Scottish sector, which could be a 'basket of measures' to identify 'teaching excellence'.

In addition, the sector wanted Scotland to be recognised as the UK sector leader on evidence-based enhancement.

As with all Themes, this topic was chosen because of its relevance to the HE sector in Scotland. It was a good choice of topic in 2017 and it has proved to be particularly timely as the Theme has progressed. Every year, more and more data and information become available through surveys, government reports, evaluations and reviews, and the ability to interpret and respond to the growing complexity of information requires skills that come from institutional and sector-wide collaborations. This is the strength of the Enhancement Themes approach and this report provides numerous examples of the way the sector has worked together to good effect.

A particular strength of this Theme has been the approach to evaluation, using the three-year cross-activity logic chain model to identify the relationship between activities, benefits, outcomes and impact in the short, medium and longer-term. The institutional teams were guided from the outset to incorporate evaluation into their projects and this has led to a much greater understanding of the impact of the work, particularly on the student experience. The structured guidance provided to the institutional teams through the use of templates to support the evaluation process (as shown in the Appendices) serves as a valuable tool in itself and one that will be of considerable value to everyone involved in running institutional projects in the future.

The report states that 'the most significant and well-evidenced change that occurred as a result of the Evidence for Enhancement Theme was the development of a more evidence-informed culture within the higher education institutions in Scotland'. This conclusion is backed up by many examples of institutional work, cross-institutional collaborative clusters, and cross-sector collaborations. The report features a number of in-depth case studies, and identifies the richness of data sources and the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods. It also identifies the need for further attention, notably the need to draw more staff and students into the work, particularly to raise their awareness of the resources and the support available to help them engage more actively with data and evidence.

The report also identifies those areas of work that have yet to demonstrate impact, not because they have been unsuccessful but because the impact will take longer than the three years of the Theme. It is good to remember this. While the Theme has clearly stimulated a sector-wide enhancement of the use of evidence, a commitment to continue this work in the Scottish HE sector will lead to a sustained impact on student experiences and outcomes well into the future.

I encourage you to read this report and to continue to engage in the sector-leading work of the Enhancement Themes in Scotland.

Professor Alyson Tobin
Edinburgh Napier University

Chair of SHEEC; Chair of Theme Leaders' Group 2018-20

Executive Summary

Context

Scotland has a unique and well-developed Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), of which the Enhancement Themes is a significant aspect. The aim of this piece of work was to evaluate the impact of the 2017-2020 Theme 'Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience' ('the Theme').

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 and with QAA Scotland (QAAS) 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, both 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
- update policies by taking an evidence-informed approach, for example 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 and professional support staff
- develop evidence-informed practice impacting on access, transition, community and belonging, retention and student feedback processes, and
- evaluate the impact of interventions and changes.

Students have been involved in the work of the Theme in a number of ways.

- Students have continued to have equal representation on the Theme Leaders' Group (TLG).
- Projects have been led by students, either working together or with groups of staff for example, to improve community and belonging.
- Students have undertaken research about key issues and presented their findings to working groups.
- Students have been consulted on processes and contributed to change, for example in relation to the use of data and assessment practices.

Through many aspects of the process, the sector has worked together to share experiences and develop understanding, capacity, resources and impact. All Scottish higher education institutions (HEIs) have participated in a least one collaborative cluster, but to date there is limited evidence offered of impact.

An impressive set of sector-level resources to inform different audiences about data and evidence, and to facilitate use of evidence, have been developed by QAAS. Work is needed to engage a larger and wider group of staff and students in using the resources.

The work of the Scottish HEIs and QAAS is influencing the work of other sector-wide bodies, such as sparqs, both encouraging greater use of evidence, and being informed by the work and resources developed by the Theme.

Organisational factors influencing the Theme include: 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 coordinator; effective communication and engagement of staff and students; and increased evaluation capacity.

The evaluation process has developed evaluation capacity, demonstrated through:

- a stronger understanding of the need to provide evidence of impact, both in terms of longer-term goals and intermediate goals
- greater capacity to plan, collect and report relevant impact evaluation evidence
- increased commitment to building evaluation into the process from the beginning, rather than adding it on towards the end of the process
- application of the logic chain and theory of change tools to develop indicators of impact, baselines and evidence
- evidence of impact of this Enhancement Theme.

What are the implications?

For **QAA Scotland**: the evaluation demonstrates the success of the Enhancement Themes and the value of embedding evaluation. Consideration should be given to the role and contribution of collaborative clusters, how to maximise engagement with sector-level work, and developing some shared intermediate indicators of success or common evaluation tools to promote comparability.

Higher education institutions have achieved a significant amount, and should pay attention to embedding new evidence and processes and learning from effective practice in other institutions.

Other sector-wide bodies have benefitted from the Enhancement Themes work, but this impact could be increased through greater involvement.

Introduction

This is the evaluation report of the Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience Enhancement Theme. This is a programme of work led by the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland (QAAS) in which all higher education institutions in Scotland participated, between 2017 and 2020. The ambition of the Theme was to extend the contribution of data and evidence to improve the student experience across higher education in Scotland.

Continuous improvement is at the heart of Scotland's approach to higher education quality. As the topic of each Enhancement Theme changes with successive Themes, the sector continues to develop its approach to Theme delivery. Evaluating impact has become an increasingly important aspect of Theme work as we try to better understand the value of this work to the sector. Building on the 2015-17 Student Transitions Theme evaluation approach, a theory of change and logic chain model was used to evaluate the impact of Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience.

> 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.
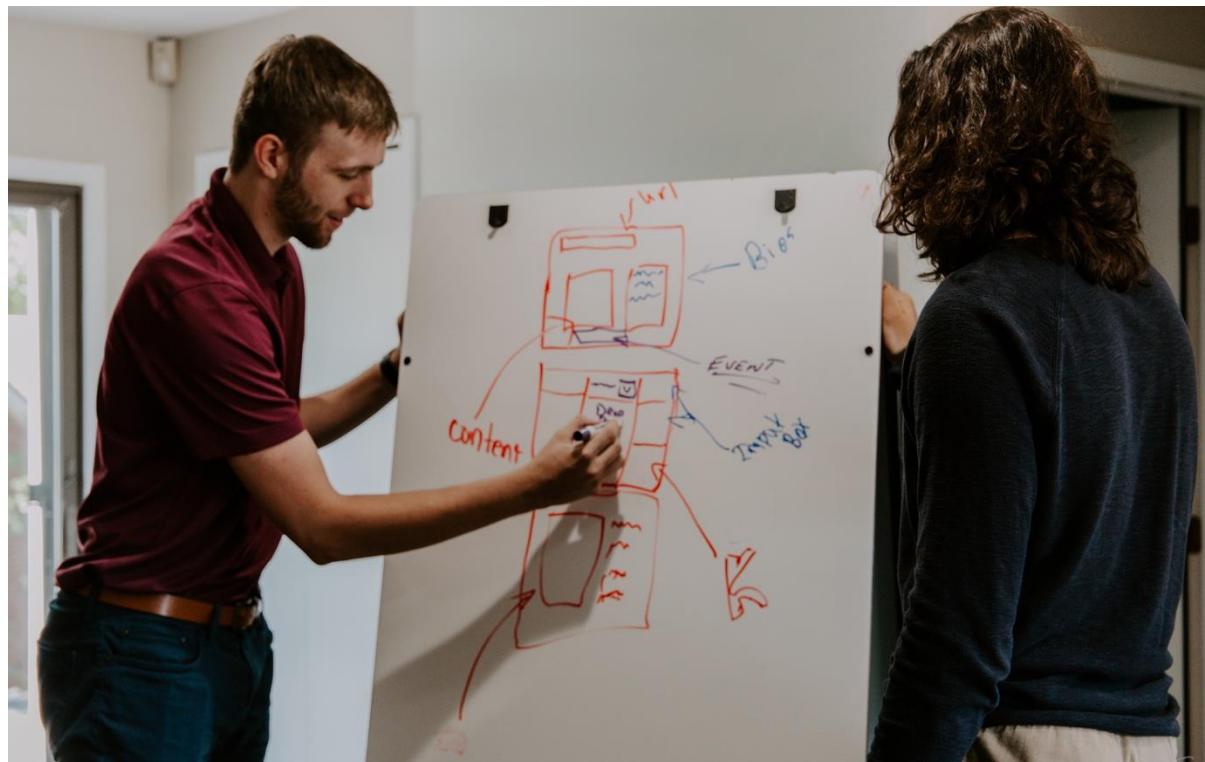
1 Context

1.1 Quality Enhancement in Scotland

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) works across all four nations of the UK to protect standards and improve the quality of higher education. QAA tailors the way it works across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, in order to meet the needs of each nation.

Established in 2003, the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) is the enhancement-led approach to quality in Scottish higher education. Collaboration and partnership working are at the heart of this innovative method. The QEF provides public confidence in academic standards and supports institutions in managing the quality of the student learning experience. To best meet the needs of students and providers in Scotland, QAA has a dedicated team, QAA Scotland, who ensure that the QEF meets both Scotland's needs and delivers UK-wide comparability.

The collaborative approach within the QEF is very distinct and QAA Scotland works with its partners to deliver its five key elements:

- Enhancement-led Institutional Review
- Enhancement Themes
- Institution-led Review
- student engagement
- public information.

Further information on the QEF and the work of QAA Scotland can be found on QAA Scotland's web pages.

1.2 Enhancement Themes

The national programme of Enhancement Themes is led by the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC) and managed by QAA Scotland. Within each Theme, institutions, academic and professional services staff, and students are encouraged to work together to generate ideas and find innovative ways to enhance the learning experience of students. Each Theme allows the sector to share and learn from current and innovative national and international practice. The Enhancement Theme web pages provide information on the 10 Themes completed since 2003.

Themes organisation and delivery has evolved over time. Typically, each Theme operates at three levels: institutional, collaborative cluster and sector. While SHEEC leads and provides strategic oversight, the Theme Leaders' Group (TLG) is central to delivering the Theme.

TLG membership includes one staff and one student representative from every Scottish HEI. In addition, representatives of key stakeholder organisations and agencies have observer status on the Group, principally the Scottish Funding Council, Universities Scotland, Advance HE and sparqs (student partnerships in quality Scotland). QAA Scotland officers participate in TLG meetings as part of their role in supporting the management and delivery of the Theme. TLG is chaired by a Theme Leader; a senior member of institutional staff, who is supported by at least one Theme Deputy and at least one student Theme Lead. Together this small, senior team is known as the Theme Leadership Team (TLT).[1]

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[1] For Evidence for Enhancement, the TLT comprised a staff Lead, two staff Deputy Leads and one Student Lead.

TLG staff representatives usually coordinate their institution's work on the Theme through an institutional team. The work of the 19 Scottish HEIs is varied, with each agreeing an annual plan of work that fulfils the needs and aspirations of the institution and tends to align with its wider strategic priorities.

Aimed at promoting collaboration between institutions, the Enhancement Themes also include projects that are run as collaborative clusters. These are projects where groups of institutions agree to work collectively on matters of mutual interest, within the broad scope of the Theme, which have the potential to add value to the whole sector once complete.

Sector-level projects are managed by QAA Scotland, sometimes as commissioned activities, which aim to draw in colleagues across all 19 Scottish institutions.

2 Overview of Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience Theme

The Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience Theme ran for three years from 2017 to 2020. Figure 1 shows the structure of the Theme. Typical of more recent Themes, the programme of work for Evidence for Enhancement was organised into activities at institutional, collaborative cluster and sector levels. Activity was taken forward through three broad strands, but over the duration of the Theme this categorisation became less significant in terms of Theme organisation:

- optimising the use of existing evidence: supporting staff and students to use and interpret data and identifying data that will help the sector to understand its strengths and challenges better
- student engagement: understanding and using the student voice, and considering concepts where there is no readily available data, such as student community, identity and belonging
- student demographics, retention and attainment: using learning analytics to support student success and supporting institutions to understand the links between changing demographics, retention, progression and attainment, including the ways these are reported.

Figure 1: Theme organisation
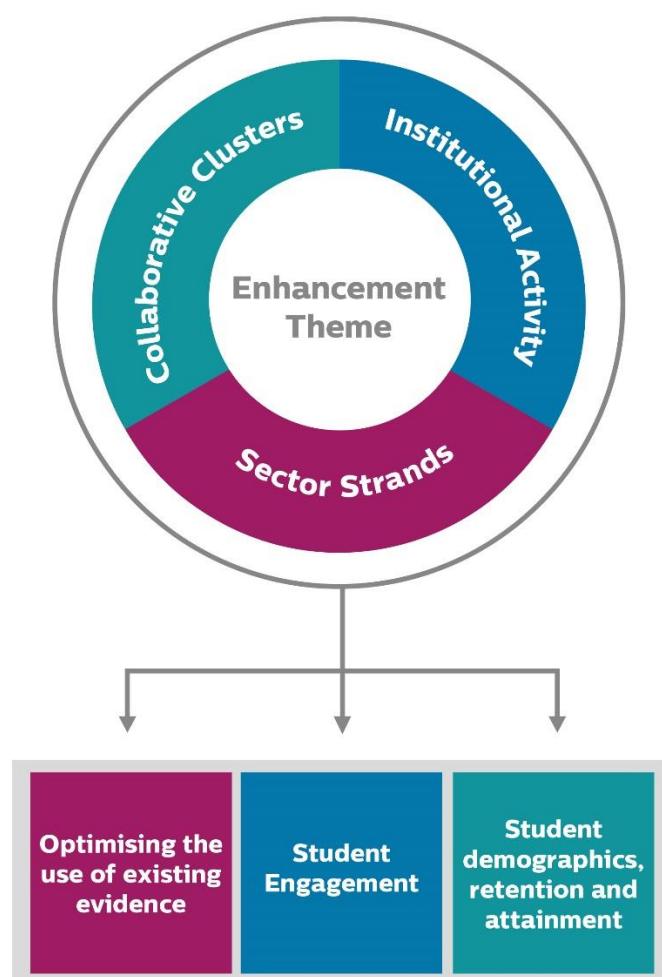
The Theme asked about the information (or evidence) used to identify, prioritise, evaluate and report on what's good and what could be better about the student experience. The Theme encouraged reflection on the following questions:

- What information is useful to help us identify and understand what we do well and what could be improved?
- Do we use the information we have in the best way possible?
- Do we have the right information?

This Theme was a compelling and timely development in light of:

- the increase in the availability, visibility and granularity of data and evidence, associated with, for example, longitudinal educational outcomes, Teaching Excellence Framework and widening access
- universities transforming practice and policy at all levels through the use of new systems that generate data about student performance, including learning analytics
- the effect of this 'data revolution' on everyone and data management systems as a whole
- alignment with Scottish Government priorities and relevance to the English higher education landscape and the prominence of data for Office for Students regulation.

Figure 2 shows the key outputs across the three levels of the Theme. Institutions were engaged in varied and extensive programmes of work broadly aligning with the three Theme strands. Projects ranged from local small-scale to large whole-institution initiatives. Details were recorded in annual plans and progress reported annually. Summary overviews of institutions' annual plans and reports are available on the [Theme web pages](#).

Eight collaborative clusters ran during Evidence for Enhancement and every institution was involved in at least one cluster. The sector work comprised six projects, producing a range of outcomes and outputs, which were managed by QAA Scotland. QAAS also worked closely with a group of higher education planners on two sector-wide projects.

Figure 2: Institutional, collaborative cluster and sector-wide activity

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

Enhancing programme leadership

Edinburgh Napier University and Glasgow Caledonian University

Learning analytics policy and practice

led by the University of Strathclyde

Widening participation with lecture recording

led by the University of Edinburgh

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

3   Evaluating the Evidence for Enhancement Theme

This section details the evaluation approach used to evidence the impact of the Evidence for Enhancement Theme. The rest of the report provides further details about the impact, how it was achieved, and next steps.

3.1   The evaluation approach

Discussions with key stakeholders, and an initial review of institutional and sector plans, identified the dual goals of creating a culture in Scottish higher education that uses evidence to enhance the student experience, and directly improves the student experience.

The evaluation model adopted uses programme theory evaluation tools; this approach seeks to identify how interventions or changes are expected to work, and then tests out whether this happens. The focus is therefore on impact, but the evaluation model acknowledges that longer-term impact can take time to be achieved, and, indeed, may occur beyond the three-year duration of the Enhancement Theme. 'Intermediate outcomes' are used to help bridge this gap; these are understood as the changes that are expected to happen on the way to achieving longer-term impact, and so they map the journey towards impact, and can be used to assess progress.

In the Theme evaluation approach, intermediate outcomes were conceptualised as short-term or immediate benefits that occurred when activities were implemented, and medium-term outcomes were changes that duly took place (for example, staff or students did something differently). Short-term benefits and medium-term outcomes were used to demonstrate progress towards the longer-term impact, or to adjust interventions to help achieve the longer-term goals. Thus, the evaluation approach also included a formative dimension.

The programme evaluation tools used are logic chains and theory of change.[2] The logic chain has been used to help clarify the relationship between activities, benefits, outcomes and impact in the short, medium and longer-term time periods. An overarching logic chain for the Theme is presented in figure 3 below. Institutional teams and other project leads were supported to develop more specific logic chains in relation to individual projects and interventions, to reflect their work and expected impact.

Figure 3: Logic chain informing the impact evaluation of Evidence for Enhancement

This process can be enhanced by the use of a theory of change approach. This is intended to set out a logical step-by-step approach to how change is anticipated to happen, and this is informed by 'if… then…' logic. This requires the team implementing change to further consider the relationship between activities and impact. This reflection may identify assumptions or flaws in teams' thinking, which can be addressed. It is also used to identify the 'steps' towards change, and thus facilitates the development of interim indicators of

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[2] Thomas, L (2020) Using logic chain and theory of change tools to evaluate widening participation: Learning from the *What works? Student Retention & Success* programme, *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, vol 22, no 2, pp 67-82

success for which evidence sources and targets can be agreed. A somewhat generic theory of change could be composed of the following components, for example:

> If the activity is delivered as planned, then staff/students understand more about the evidence we have. If they know more about the evidence available, then they can use this evidence to enhance practice. If staff/students change their practices then there will be a positive impact on the student experience and/or student outcomes.

By exploring the relationship between the components of the logic chain it is possible to spot assumptions or gaps. For example, in order for staff and students to understand more about the evidence available, they may require skills development; structural change may even be necessary. Thus, the approach acknowledges the complexity of change involving multiple actors, activities, beneficiaries and outcomes, but seeks to clarify and identify steps towards new ways of doing things, including cultural change, and improving student experiences and outcomes, creating an impact pathway. Outlining the relationship between activities and longer-term impact also helps to identify intermediate indicators that enable teams to check whether or not they are on track to achieve their goals.

Throughout the life of this Enhancement Theme, greater understanding of the impact pathway was achieved. Many of the enhancement activities acted upon staff (for example, providing them with more accessible data or training about how to use data); some activities involved students (for example, consulting them about participation in surveys) and others acted upon students directly (for example, providing student representatives with more data). The majority of activities often resulted in better data collection and/or better use of evidence by staff, while a smaller number encouraged and supported students to provide feedback (for example, through surveys) or engaged with, and made better use of, data or evidence.

Improving the quality of data and evidence, and the ways in which it is used, contributes to more evidence-informed policies, processes and decision-making at individual, programme and institutional levels. For example, if staff believe that the evidence is representative of a wide range of students, or they know how to access and interpret the data, or they are encouraged to respond to the data through an institutional process, then the data and evidence is more likely to be drawn upon to inform decision-making about the student experience. The Theme process can therefore be understood as empowering staff and students to use evidence more effectively to inform, or argue for, improvements to the student experience in terms of both practice and policy, and **in time** these changes are likely to improve the student experience - which might be observed through indicators relating to satisfaction, continuation, and progression, attainment, and graduate outcomes. (This is discussed more fully in section 5.2). These programme theory evaluation tools contribute to understanding of how change works, test out if change is occurring and, when impact occurs beyond a project's allotted timeframe, increase confidence that longer-term impacts will be achieved.

It was identified early on that there was a considerable volume of activity being undertaken as part of the Theme. The evaluation approach aimed to be supportive and constructive. Institutions were asked to select their evaluation priorities, and categorise each project into one of three evaluation categories: in-depth evaluation; light-touch evaluation; or no evaluation (see Appendix 1). Institutions were advised that large projects (which are those taking place across the institution, or involving significant staff time or financial investment) could be placed into any category, but that at least one and no more than three large projects should be subject to in-depth evaluation. Smaller projects that operated locally, involving one or two staff and students with little or no project funding, were likely to be light-touch or not evaluated. Evaluation priorities could be changed annually if deemed appropriate by institutions. Templates were designed to support the evaluation process, along with worked examples. For light-touch evaluations, a reporting template prompted

teams to include information about a range of pertinent topics (see Appendix 2). For in-depth evaluations, a template was designed to guide teams through the process of developing an evaluation plan with effective short, medium and longer-term indicators, methods of verification and baselines, if appropriate (see Appendices 3 and 4). These plans were reviewed, and individual and group feedback was provided, with the latter including exemplars.

Where possible, teams were encouraged to make use of existing data and evidence to examine the impact of their interventions. While this included institutional data, interviews with members of the Theme Leaders' Group identified other types of evidence that could be drawn upon:

- module evaluation forms and student feedback on courses
- institutional surveys, including additional questions and free text responses
- minutes from staff-student liaison meetings and other committee meetings
- staff applications for promotion or Advance HE fellowships
- institutional data: attendance, continuation, progression, number of assessment submissions, attainment, resits, virtual learning environment (VLE) engagement
- staff annual monitoring/review of own performance, course, and so on
- course documents, periodic review, quality processes, Teaching Excellence Framework narratives
- withdrawal reports
- student-led teaching award nominations.

As this list demonstrates, not all evidence that could be used to measure (progress towards) impact, is quantitative but rather a mixture of different types of evidence that can be used to provide a balanced assessment of progress towards longer-term goals.

Similarly, programme theory evaluation is not based on the premise that a baseline will exist against which progress can be measured, although in some instances a baseline can strengthen evidence of change. Where a baseline is useful, this may be based on **changes** to historic practice (for example, comparing one year to an average from previous years), or differences in **current** practice (for example, comparing a course that has implemented data collection changes to one that has not). In some cases, it is more appropriate to establish a baseline from qualitative, rather than quantitative, data. An example of a quantitative baseline might be data resulting from a pre-intervention survey (that could later be compared to data from a post-intervention survey). A qualitative baseline, on the other hand, might be established by examining annual review documentation for a given programme in order to identify how its leaders have used evidence to enhance the programme in previous years. This approach may yield more insightful findings. It also mitigates some of the shortcomings of quantitative surveys, and reduces the need to generate additional data.

In summary, the evaluation approach for the Evidence for Enhancement Theme:

- focused on impact
- selected evaluation priorities and offered a range of evaluation categories
- used programme theory evaluation tools; logic chains and theory of change
- identified intermediate impact indicators; short-term benefits and medium-term outcomes
- used intermediate indicators formatively to adjust interventions and make them more likely to achieve longer-term impact
- mapped the impact pathway, allowing evidence of impact to be identified within the project timeframe
- drew on quantitative and qualitative evidence

- exploited existing or naturally occurring data as well as collecting new evidence, and
- utilised historical and comparative quantitative and qualitative baselines when it was useful to do so.

3.2   Evaluation evidence

In 2018-19, institutions were required to provide information about their evaluation intentions. In summary, institutions indicated 82 projects were underway and the majority (74%) to be evaluated in some way; 46% through the light-touch evaluation approach and 28% through an in-depth evaluation.

For each project to be evaluated in-depth, a plan was developed using the template in Appendix 3. Individual feedback was provided, and generic feedback and examples of good practice were shared at a TLG meeting. Additional evaluation support was available, and a couple of institutions took advantage of this.

This activity was not repeated in 2019-20 as relatively few new projects were initiated this year, and institutions planned to continue working on and evaluating existing projects. In session 2019-20, institutions were encouraged to ensure they were collecting appropriate and sufficient evidence to inform their evaluation reports, and teams planned more evaluation activity.

Figure 4: Evaluation report evidence

Institutions	Collaborative clusters	Sector-level
• Year 2 and 3 HEI reports • **23** in-depth evaluations • **53** light-touch evaluations	• **2** in-depth evaluations • **4** light-touch evaluations	• **5** in-depth evaluations • **3** light-touch evaluations • QAAS - additional documentary evidence • TLG and SHEEC interviews and focus groups • TLG presentations • Advance HE, SFC and sparqs interviews

A complete list of the evaluation reports is provided in Appendix 5.

3.3   The impact of COVID-19 on the evaluation process

The closure of campuses due to COVID-19 impacted considerably on the evaluation of Enhancement Theme work in the first half of 2020. In particular, plans to collect qualitative evidence were disrupted as staff had other priorities and students were less easy to access, it became more challenging to engage with students. Institutions noted that the pandemic made the in-person collection of evidence impossible, but also the immediate and large-scale response altered the priorities of staff involved in learning, teaching and enhancement activities. Comments such as, 'the challenging circumstances of COVID-19 impacted on capacity to undertake full reflection and evaluation, as had been anticipated' (Robert Gordon University Year 3 report), could be found in most institutional reports for 2019-20.

More positively, however, materials developed through the Theme assisted with institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the pivot to digital learning influenced some areas of Theme activity. These matters are discussed in section 4.1.6.

4   Creating an evidence-informed culture

The most significant and well-evidenced change that occurred as a result of the Evidence for Enhancement Theme was the development of a more 'evidence-informed culture' within the higher education institutions in Scotland. In essence, an 'evidence-informed culture' refers to the widespread and instinctive use of evidence and data to inform both formal decision-making and day-to-day choices and actions, by staff and students, at different levels across HEIs.

The initial logic chain and accompanying theory of change statement (see section 3.1) could be amended to specifically include the development of an evidence-informed culture as either a medium-term outcome or a longer-term impact. For example, the revised logic chain could be framed as follows in figure 5.

Figure 5: Expanded logic chain demonstrating the impact of the Evidence for Enhancement Theme

A more detailed visualisation (shown in figure 6 below) illustrates how the activities delivered in institutions, and through collaborative clusters and sector-level activities, contributed to the generation of better quality data and evidence, and greater accessibility of data and evidence, and increased the capacity of staff and students to utilise data and evidence. These benefits led to greater use of data and evidence to inform changes to policy and practice, and facilitated the evaluation of enhancement activities. All of these factors contributed to a more evidence-informed culture developing within the Scottish higher education sector.

Section 4.1 provides the evidence to justify the claim that a more evidence-informed culture was created, and section 4.2 discusses how a more evidence-informed culture was achieved.

Figure 6: The impact of the Evidence for Enhancement Theme
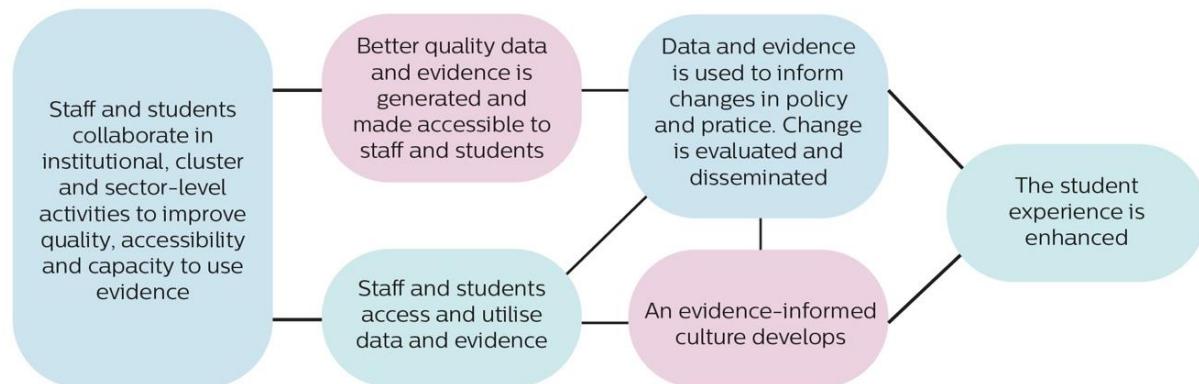
4.1 A more evidence-informed culture

The evidence presented in the evaluation reports and institutional reports, and collected through interviews with TLG members (in 2018), discussions with TLG members (in 2020), and representatives from other sector-wide organisations (in 2020) indicated that the Theme directly contributed to a more evidence-informed culture within Scottish higher education. Sector colleagues spoke of greater awareness of and requests for evidence in various decision-making contexts within their institutions.

Analysis of the evaluation materials provided examples of a more evidence-informed culture, as shown in figure 7.

Figure 7: A more evidence-informed culture within Scottish higher education

This culture change is reflected in more evidence-informed discussions, with data and evidence being used in strategic decision-making, and informing individual and programme team practices. The culture change has been reinforced by structural changes within the institutions, such as changes to policies and processes, including changes to processes to improve data and evidence collection and use.

4.1.1 Greater use of evidence

The staff and students who participated in the focus groups and contributed to the evaluation reports, described changes in institutional cultures where data and evidence play a more central role and influence decision-making. Data and evidence are requested and discussed more than previously, and data experts are engaged in conversations with other colleagues. The greater use of evidence can be demonstrated through the reflections from institutional staff below, and in specific examples discussed in section 4.1.2.

Several institutions identified a 'hunger' for more data and evidence. An example of this is highlighted by the following:

> *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 Year 3 report)

An increased desire for data and evidence was also noted in focus group discussions, illustrated by the following examples.

At the University of Glasgow there were three groups looking at the use of data in relation to student wellbeing, with one participant noting that, 'data has become so topical and everyone is pushing for greater transparency' (University of Glasgow TLG focus group). This demonstrates a willingness to engage with data and evidence and move away from opinion.

Scotland's Rural College has worked on extracting data and providing it to staff for annual monitoring, which has resulted in more dialogue about evidence and improving the student experience. There is a view that the institution is moving away from 'relying on feelings and anecdotal evidence' towards an 'evidence-informed approach which is powerful and transformative' (Scotland's Rural College TLG focus group). For example, for work in relation to mental health issues, the College has been able to use information and evidence from the Student Mental Wellbeing collaborative cluster rather than relying on anecdotes or informal observations.

At Heriot-Watt University, 'the idea that more questions should be asked of data sets and more use should be made of the available evidence is gaining traction' (Heriot-Watt University TLG focus group).

At the University of Dundee, 'conversations are shifting and there is greater confidence in the use of data and there is less opposition to the use of data'; this is demonstrated through greater use of data at learning and teaching committee and in school boards (University of Dundee TLG focus group).

Similarly, the University of the Highlands and Islands reports that at the senate learning and teaching committee there is more of an appetite for data and more training has been taken up (University of the Highlands and Islands TLG focus group).

The Robert Gordon University reports that the Theme has, 'embedded an evidence-based mindset across a wider spectrum of staff' (Robert Gordon University TLG focus group).

The Responding to Student Voice principles and cards provide an example of how a sector-level resource generated by the Theme has been used to promote and facilitate effective conversations about data and evidence at Students' Associations/Unions and institutions across Scotland. The University of Dundee Students' Association (DUSA) (presentation to TLG, 16 March 2020) used the cards to try to improve the value of Staff-Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) meetings. The School of Education and Social Work reported minimal engagement with their SSLC. In partnership with DUSA, the School ran workshops with student representatives and senior colleagues. The principles and cards supported a discussion of existing issues in the SSLC and the identification of actions to enhance the committee. At the Robert Gordon University (presentation to TLG 16 March 2020) the student representation system has been overhauled, and a series of workshops was organised to support this. 'The cards helped us see what we don't do well and celebrate our achievements…the cards really helped with this process'. The Responding to Student Voice project is considered in more detail in section 6.2.2.

Institutions are very positive about how the Theme has impacted on their institutional culture. The Robert Gordon University states that participation in the Theme enabled:

- clear institutional commitment to the use of evidence in its approaches to enhancement
- greater understanding of its core evidence-base
- colleagues to reflect on the use of evidence within their own contexts, and
- new insights to be gained from learners to ensure that enhancements have meaningful, positive impact on the student experience (Robert Gordon University Year 3 report).

The University of Dundee provides a good example of an institution that has made substantial progress over the course of the Theme in terms of making greater use of evidence, and provides a range of specific examples:

> *We are as an institution both more data-literate and more data-minded than we were three years ago. Evidence of this can be found in the participation rates for the training courses we offered through Organisational and Professional Development, in the University-wide adoption of our new module feedback questionnaire, in our new Power-BI dashboards, in our Student Partnership Agreement and DUSA's training of class reps, in working groups and committees that use data to solve problems and enhance areas such as widening participation, distance learning and engagement, retention and progression. Programme leaders now have access to data that enable them to produce annual Retention plans as well as NSS plans. These are disseminated via School L&T committees and overseen by the Vice-Principal for Education. NSS results are also more systematically shared through L&T committees and Staff-Student Liaison Committees.*
> (University of Dundee Year 3 report)

Similarly, Glasgow Caledonian University commented that:

> *The use of evidence and the quality of professional conversations informed by evidence has improved. There is now an increased expectation that initiatives will pilot and collect data to justify the efficacy of an approach. There are enhanced relationships between academic and professional services staff, and students/Students' Association. There is now a culture of assembling cross-institutional teams to address strategic priorities and challenges and there are a number of end-to-end examples of evidence-led change that can serve as a blueprint for future effort.*
> (Glasgow Caledonian University Year 3 report)

If there is greater use of evidence within an institution, then this will be reflected in changes to policies and processes, including the embedding of ways of collecting and using data and evidence, and it will inform planning and practice within the institution. Evidence of these changes is discussed in the next sections.

4.1.2 Evidence-informed policies and processes

To demonstrate a more evidence-informed culture, this section reports on examples of how data and evidence have been used to inform policies and processes within institutions, as a result of the Theme.

A significant area in which policies and processes have been changed is in relation to the annual monitoring process. The University of Glasgow undertook a review of its annual

monitoring process, which resulted in the development of a revised approach, agreed by the Education, Policy & Strategy Committee in May 2020 (University of Glasgow Light-touch evaluation). Similarly, Glasgow School of Art's Programme Monitoring and Annual Reporting (PMAR) documentation was extensively reviewed in academic year 2018-19. The changes made to the documentation aimed to streamline the process, improve critical reflection and analysis, and remove the potential for duplication. The implementation of these changes was halted by COVID-19 in both of these institutions, but will be resumed (Glasgow School of Art In-depth evaluation). At Robert Gordon University, Annual Appraisal process revisions were implemented, and, reflecting on the revised process, the Assistant Chief Academic Officer reported:

> *We are now very much in a position that we have provided colleagues with clearer data to interpret, that people can analyse that data, look at what they've done, and then reflect…colleagues are making more informed decisions, and then they're measuring and reflecting the data to see if that action has delivered the outcome that they hoped for.*
> (Robert Gordon University Year 3 report)

The Robert Gordon University has also used the Theme to improve its processes to support its preparation for their Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) in 2021. The University took the opportunity to reflect on its longitudinal, strategic approach to evidencing quality enhancement. Recognising the importance of effective self-evaluation, it considered how evidence has increasingly become central to the identification of enhancement priorities; development of project methodology; monitoring progress; and undertaking impact evaluation. A series of semi-structured interviews facilitated reflection upon what the work of the Theme uncovered and what has subsequently changed as a result. These interviews will underpin a 'thought piece' and collective insights will inform the future development of the University's enhancement approach (Robert Gordon University Year 3 report).

Other examples of changes to policies and processes cited in the institutional reports and evaluations are:

- at the University of Edinburgh, the student voice policy has been reviewed, and changes planned, as part of its Theme work (University of Edinburgh Year 3 report)
- at Glasgow Caledonian University, a conference and workshop on academic advising resulted in recommendations which have informed changes to the academic advising policy and changes to the University structure. These amendments included more use of timetabled advising slots and signposting students to other services (Glasgow Caledonian University Light-touch evaluation)
- the University of Dundee has introduced electronic attendance monitoring to improve student retention. As part of this institutional culture change, the system is being trialled in two Schools with first-year students. If positive changes are observed in the retention of this first-year cohort, then the system will be rolled out across the institution (University of Dundee Year 2 report)
- Robert Gordon University made changes to forward planning policies and processes, and its institutional framework has been developed to support institutional priorities, for example, the assessment framework (Robert Gordon University TLG Focus group).

In summary, there is a range of examples from across the Scottish higher education institutions of ways in which the Theme has prompted evidence-informed changes to institutional policies and processes. Most commonly this has been in relation to the annual review process, but the potential impact is much wider, as reflected in the diverse list above - many policies shaping the student experience have been revised, for example, attendance monitoring, assessment and academic advising.

4.1.3 Evidence-informed planning and decision-making

An evidence-informed culture can be demonstrated by an explicit link between data and evidence and institutional decision-making and planning. For example, the University of Stirling commented:

> *We are using evidence-based decision-making and measuring impact of projects more effectively than we have done in the past. We are thinking carefully about what data we need and how to present it effectively.*
> (University of Stirling Year 3 report)

It is clear in the discussion above in section 4.1.1 about an evidence-informed culture, and below in section 4.1.6 about institutions' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, that Scottish higher education institutions are more routinely looking at evidence about learning, teaching and the student experience to inform decision-making. This is used to complement the professional expertise of staff and the experiences and opinions of student representatives involved in decision-making at different levels within the institution.

Institutions were not specifically asked to report on how the Theme informed decision-making, but some examples included in institutional reports help to highlight how the Theme has contributed to changing institutional culture by facilitating greater use of data and evidence in decision-making at a range of levels.

- The University of St Andrews' Strategic Plan has been informed by the gathering of data from siloed work areas and using this evidence to enhance the wider student experience in a more holistic way. In particular, approaches to sustainability, diversity and entrepreneurship have been brought together (University of St Andrews TLG Focus group).
- There are several examples from the University of Edinburgh about how data and evidence are being used to inform decision-making. More data is being shared with students, which provides greater transparency, but also helps the institution to be clearer about how it uses data to plan for the future (University of Edinburgh In-depth evaluation). A commitment to understanding and using data means that administrators and teaching teams have a better understanding of student need, and are using this to inform decision-making. For example, non-continuation data is being used to enhance understanding of the student experience, and mid-course feedback is informing developments (University of Edinburgh Year 3 report).
- Both the University of the Highlands and Islands and Scotland's Rural College agreed that evidence is being used to inform better decision-making and the allocation of resources. For example, the College has a balanced scorecard approach which is being used by its Board to track progress and inform strategy in a number of areas, including marketing and recruitment; NSS results; and learning and teaching qualifications of academic staff. This puts the emphasis on using evidence and data at all levels from programmes, to the Board of Studies to the Executive, to inform decision-making (Scotland's Rural College Year 2 report).
- At the University of the Highlands and Islands there is evidence of greater use of data in student satisfaction (NSS) and retention plans that have to be prepared by all Schools. Where previously staff may have drawn upon anecdotal evidence and general impressions to prioritise retention activities, they are now empowered to use more robust sources of evidence (University of the Highlands and Islands Online focus group).
- The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland undertook work to evaluate mental health support mechanisms. This work identified issues such as the prevalence of 'performance anxiety', gaps in provision to support mental health, and potential improvements. The evaluation and research had an impact on institutional practice

and informed the development of a strategy to meet the increasing need for support in this area (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland Year 2 and 3 reports).

4.1.4 Processes to embed or improve the collection and use of data and evidence

The discussions above suggest that as a result of the Theme, HEIs in Scotland are making greater use of data and evidence. This improvement can be reinforced by the development or improvement of embedded processes to collect and use data and evidence. This helps to ensure that good practice in collecting and using data and evidence is rolled out and undertaken across the institution, and so applied more consistently. For example, a number of institutions used the Theme as an opportunity to review and revise their annual monitoring processes, as discussed in section 4.1.2. This work can be extended by building steps into the annual monitoring process that require, or encourage, engagement with specific forms of data and evidence.

At the University of Dundee, the publication of data (such as progression, attainment, and degree classification results) to support annual module and programme monitoring has been systematised, standardised and provided to staff. Previously, where Module and Programme Leaders had to request administrative support to access the data, teaching staff are now sent alerts when the data is published. Regular and sustained engagement with data as part of the institution's annual monitoring procedures is encouraged (University of Dundee Year 3 report).

Abertay University built the use of evidence into many institutional processes, including institution-led reviews and annual monitoring, to promote reflection. The annual monitoring process was improved, including the introduction of Divisional-level reports, and working with Divisional Heads to improve understanding of the process and the data available. Analysis of medium-term outcomes showed that six out of 12 Division reports had made better use of data, while the other six Divisions were already making good use of evidence in their annual monitoring reports; for example, evidence (NSS, module performance, student retention) being presented and discussed in detail, and the explicit linking of proposed actions to the evidence base. Two of the reports noted the impact of the actions proposed in the previous year's reports and supported the discussion of their impact with reference to evidence (Abertay University In-depth report).

The University of Strathclyde undertook an ambitious project to develop a Learner Experience Framework (LEF). The LEF captures the distinctiveness and richness of the Strathclyde educational experience through a portfolio of performance indicators, which leads to better understanding and delivery of support to students on their journey to becoming effective graduates. The LEF was developed with considerable input from student interns and is now embedded into institutional processes. It outlines six themes with key metrics, including measures for internships; industry links; international opportunities; use of digital technologies; graduate attributes; and retention and progression (University of Strathclyde In-depth evaluation). During its Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) in 2018-19, the LEF was presented and gained positive feedback:

> *The ELIR team recognised that the LEF demonstrates a strategic development which contributes to a positive student experience and a range of commendable practice such as the University's links with industry, provision of international opportunities and the use of data to inform decision-making.*
> (University of Strathclyde, Enhancement-led Institutional Review Technical Report, March 2019, paragraph 47)

The LEF signifies commitment to using data and improving the student experience. Practically, it provides a mechanism to draw together data which reflects on the experience within the curriculum and its ongoing enhancement, while also helping to inform the institutional services and support mechanisms in place at each stage of the learner journey.

Several projects undertook work regarding the data and evidence that student representatives have access to, to ensure that the evidence is routinely available. For example, the University of Edinburgh Students' Association and the University of Edinburgh prepared detailed handover documents to support their work to improve the evidence available to and used by student representatives. The development of the comprehensive handover documents will improve the quality of the student representative handover process, ensuring greater communication between officers about their roles and the use of evidence (University of Edinburgh In-depth report).

The work of some of the collaborative clusters is likely to result in further developments to how data is collected and presented, and how staff and students engage with it. The Learning Analytics Policy and Practice cluster has drawn together information that can be used by Scottish HEIs to present data in accessible and consistent ways (see section 4.2.2), and this supports the development of institutional processes that require or encourage staff groups to utilise data and evidence. The Enhancing Programme Leadership cluster explored the data available to programme leaders and how it can be used; the cluster shared practice and developed resources to raise awareness of the diversity of evidence available to support the role.

4.1.5   Evidence-informed practice

Another way in which the evidence-informed culture manifests is in the introduction of new practices and the improvement of existing ones, based on data and evidence. Practices are understood here as interventions and ways of doing things that are not codified in institutional policies and processes. Some examples of how data and evidence were used to change practice are presented below.

The Robert Gordon University launched the Employability Hub which aimed to provide students with a one-stop-shop to facilitate career planning and preparation to help them gain graduate-level employment; this was informed by an exploration of data.

> *Joined-up analysis of results of the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey (DLHE), feedback from the NSS, service engagement statistics, and other complementary metrics, has informed dialogue with Heads of School to focus and agree employability activities for the next academic session.*
> (Robert Gordon University Light-touch evaluation)

The data analysis was used to provide Heads of Schools with employability reports, allowing them to make local-level changes to practice, and the analysis supported some targeted interventions, including the fostering of closer industry links in certain subject areas that were falling below sector benchmarks; delivery of bespoke events for key groups; and work to articulate a set of graduate outcomes.

A second Robert Gordon University project that used data and evidence to improve practice was work to understand the graduate apprentice (GA) student experience. A bespoke student experience questionnaire was designed in collaboration with course team leaders, exploring issues that were specifically relevant to the graduate apprentices (for example, employer recruitment, mentor support and work-based learning).

This evidence was supplemented by focus groups with graduate apprentices. Triangulating evidence from these sources identified areas for enhancement, as summarised here:

- reviewing the learning plan (a Skills Development Scotland-required document setting out the GA's work-based activities and how these meet course requirements)
- a GA mentor and GA success coach were appointed to provide additional support to mentors and apprentices
- course teams reviewed the number of on-campus days
- setting out clear expectations for employers, mentors and apprentices. An open day for prospective employers was arranged to provide more information about the GA courses to employers and apprentices. Course teams also worked with the business development team to ensure all parties were fully informed about the courses prior to enrolling (Robert Gordon University In-depth evaluation).

Several examples of using evidence to inform practice emanate from the collaborative cluster work on lecture recording in the context of widening participation. Lecture recording has been a controversial topic in the higher education sector. The debate around the use of lecture recording prompted staff at the University of Edinburgh to create a collaborative cluster focused on widening participation, lecture recording, and the use of evidence. The work of the collaborative cluster influenced practice at a number of Scottish HEIs, including the University of Aberdeen where the presentation of the cluster's evidence changed institutional discourse on the subject (University of Aberdeen TLG Focus group). Similarly, Abertay University found that using the cluster evidence to inform discussions about institutional use of lecture recording positively influenced the views of its teaching staff. The impact of the cluster on staff at Abertay University is summarised below:

> *We hosted an institutional seminar to discuss the 'Pedagogical Impact of Lecture Capture including widening Participation'… This was timely as lecture capture has met opposition from staff at Abertay in the past; lockdown had just happened and recording lectures would obviously become an important part of our teaching provision. The message that Lecture Capture is a tool that if used well will not equate with poorer student attendance/engagement and helps those students with work/family commitments, health or neurological issues and those for whom English is not their first language was a useful one to support staff in engaging with recorded content.*
> (Abertay University Year 3 report)

Qualitative feedback about the event from staff demonstrated that it had changed the views of some. This illustrates how the use of evidence can contribute to changing practices, and so an institutional culture that turns to evidence, rather than relying on unsubstantiated views, can impact positively on the student experience.

There are many examples of interventions that were informed by evidence collected as part of this Enhancement Theme; a selection that was also evaluated to demonstrate quantifiable impact on the student experience is presented in section 5.1.

4.1.6 Evidence of the benefits of the Theme in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

As noted in section 3.3, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the final months of the Theme. While it reduced time available for some of the final evaluation activities, some benefits of the Theme were identified during the pandemic. First, institutions adopted a more 'evidence-informed' response to the pandemic, and second, Theme outputs were drawn upon to enhance the student experience as they switched to digital learning.

(a)   A more evidence-informed culture influenced the institutional response to
        COVID-19

A number of HEIs stated that as a result of the Theme, changes in institutional capacity and culture led to a more evidence-informed response to COVID-19. For example, Robert Gordon University stated that:

> *…with the ethos of 'evidence for enhancement' firmly embedded within the DNA of the University, this prevailed across the institution's response to the pandemic and ensuing quality assurance and enhancement activity.*
> (Robert Gordon University Year 3 report)

More specifically, 'data sources increasingly providing the starting point for facilitated dialogue':

> *An evidence-based approach to decision-making was adopted by the Teaching and Learning Group and Campus Enabling Group established to coordinate the university's response; and*
>
> *The delivery of an institutional 'pulse' survey which aimed to demonstrate to students RGU's continued commitment to listen and learn from them, and provide timely feedback to school and course leadership teams.*
> (Robert Gordon University Year 3 report)

At the University of Aberdeen, the response to the pandemic was more evidence-informed than it might have been, had not been for the Theme.

> *Wider discussions that arose as a result of the Theme have influenced the process for supporting and evaluating our response to the COVID-19 pandemic and this is likely to lead to enhancements to our blended learning provision going forward. To help support staff in the move to blended delivery, examples of practice have been gathered to feed into staff development for responding to COVID-19, especially related to online assessment and feedback and accessibility and inclusion.*
> (University of Aberdeen Year 3 report)

The cultural change towards greater use of data and evidence suggests a more effective response to the pandemic, and an enhanced learning experience for students. This has not been evaluated, and there will not be baselines available for comparison, but it is a positive endorsement of the Theme in particular, and the enhancement-led approach more generally in creating culture change.

(b)   Enhancement Theme outputs were drawn upon to support institutional responses to
        the COVID-19 pandemic

Some of the areas of work developed under the Theme were particularly useful when Scottish HEIs were forced to close campuses and switch to digital learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The collaborative clusters Developing a Sense of Belonging in Online Distance Learning, and Widening Participation with Lecture Recording were particularly relevant, and other institutional work was drawn on too. For example, the University of the Highlands and Islands commented:

> *…we would return to the 'Sense of Belonging in Online Distance Learning'
> Toolkit we codeveloped as part of one of the cluster groups we participated
> in... We have drawn heavily on the toolkit in relation to the advice we have
> given to our own staff, and are aware of it having now become a reference
> point within the wider sector.*
> (University of the Highlands and Islands Year 3 report)

The collaborative cluster focusing on Widening Participation with Lecture Recording was approximately half-way through when the lockdown happened. Cluster activities were moved online, and the focus also altered slightly to consider supporting widening participation with recordings in a blended learning environment. During the early phase of the COVID-19 outbreak and associated lockdown, the cluster leads identified a gap in the current discussions regarding how technology enhanced learning solutions to the COVID-19 'pivot' intersected with equality, diversity and inclusion aims. Through discussion with colleagues across the sector, the cluster leads developed an additional output, '10 Simple Rules for a Temporary Online Pivot in Higher Education', which offered guidance regarding incorporating widening participation needs into providing blended learning. The 'simple rules' were widely disseminated in Scotland and beyond. While it is too early to see evidence of impact, it is highly likely that the research conducted as part of the Theme, and applied to the pivot to digital learning, will have been influential.

The University of Glasgow developed a 'Student Engagement Early Warning System' as part of its Theme activities. This was invaluable when students were no longer on campus, and engagement could not be assessed visually through attendance, 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.

> *The purpose of this project is to provide colleagues with the necessary data to
> monitor and respond to emerging student engagement concerns in a timelier
> manner… To identify students who may be struggling we will monitor the
> many touchpoints they have with a given course, for example their: (a)
> interactions with our learning management system; (b) Moodle attendance in
> online lectures; (c) assessment grades etc. For every course these data
> streams will be collated and presented to the relevant academic in an online
> application, flagging those students who are at most risk of dropout/failing.*
> (University of Glasgow Light-touch evaluation)

Another highly relevant project was the 'Borderless Learning' work strand at the Robert Gordon University, which engaged with the learning community to create new evidence to underpin the development of the digital experience. While there was not time to undertake a baseline review, the original resource was used to support colleagues as digital learning became the default delivery mode. This was supplemented by the creation of the 'Staying Well' online support hub for students, and online staff development sessions sharing practice and guidance about effective online learning and assessment (Robert Gordon University Year 3 report).

These examples of how a more evidence-informed culture assisted institutions in their response to the closure of campuses, and the pivot to digital learning, provide further evidence of the benefits, outcomes and impact of the Theme, and will contribute to a resilient higher education sector moving forward.

4.1.7   Impact on the wider higher education sector

The previous sections have provided evidence of ways in which higher education institutions have moved towards a more evidence-informed culture. This section details ways in which the work of the HEIs, together with QAAS, is influencing other sector-wide bodies and the wider policy landscape.

This information has been collected through interviews with sparqs, Advance HE and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).These three sector-wide bodies were able to identify evidence that higher education institutions were making more use of data and evidence; they wanted to develop their capacity in this sphere, and thus the Theme has shaped the way the sector-wide organisations engaged with institutions. In addition, Advance HE benefitted directly from the resources developed, and all organisations felt that more collaboration would be advantageous to both provide more coordinated support to the sector, and to contribute to and benefit from the Theme work more directly. Additionally, there is evidence that the Creative Disciplines cluster has influenced policy-making in Scotland.

sparqs' portfolio of sector training has been amended to reflect the increasing interest in the use of evidence among the sector. The development of in-depth training on using data effectively has been built into their annual residential training programme for sabbatical officers. Additionally, sparqs has undertaken projects that explore institutional uses of NSS student voice data to improve the student experience.

In its development of its six-month Academic Leadership Programme in Scotland, Advance HE made use of the Theme's Enhancing Programme Leadership collaborative cluster resources.

SFC has seen a shift in institutional strategies to gathering and analysing evidence in response to the Theme and they anticipate that this shift will better prepare the sector to evidence the impact of their work to improve the student experience. SFC intends to use the learning from the Theme to support their upcoming review of outcome agreements, moving towards a less prescriptive approach and a greater focus on the evidence that matters.

The Creative Disciplines collaborative cluster aimed to raise awareness of how data is used by those managing programmes in creative subjects. It aimed also to inform and influence policy conversations relating to the wider creative economy, and there is evidence that this aim is being achieved. The work of the cluster informed the development of Scotland's Cultural Strategy and the Scottish Government's policy statement on the creative industries. It has also fed into sector-level conversations about: skills (through Universities Scotland's Learning and Teaching Committee); subject renewal of Higher National level qualifications (through partnership with the Scottish Qualifications Authority); and the development of a skills agenda framework (through partnership with Skills Development Scotland). It is anticipated that the cluster's work will continue to influence policy development, including the second stage of the Scottish Government's policy on the creative industries, National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts' (Nesta's) statement on the soft power of creative arts and design higher education (CADHE), and UK-wide analysis of the value of creative education (cluster end of project report).

This evidence, about the wider impact of the Theme, is very encouraging for two reasons. First, the wider impact of the work is likely to increase as the changes become embedded in institutions, and spill over into wider sector work. Second, and perhaps more significantly, this evaluation focused mostly on impact within higher education institutions; the newly commissioned evaluation of 20 years of Enhancement Themes will provide an opportunity to purposefully look for examples and evidence of wider impact.

4.1.8   Summary

The evidence presented in this section illustrates a higher education sector in Scotland that is significantly more evidence-informed than it was prior to the commencement of the Theme. This is stated by institutions, demonstrated by specific examples, and confirmed by sector-wide bodies; the institutional response to COVID-19 is particularly noteworthy. The sector has developed what can be understood as an evidence-informed culture, which in turn influenced and shaped structural changes to policies and processes within institutions - and these further promote and reinforce the cultural change and encourage consistency across the student experience. The next section considers the steps that have been taken to achieve this cultural change.
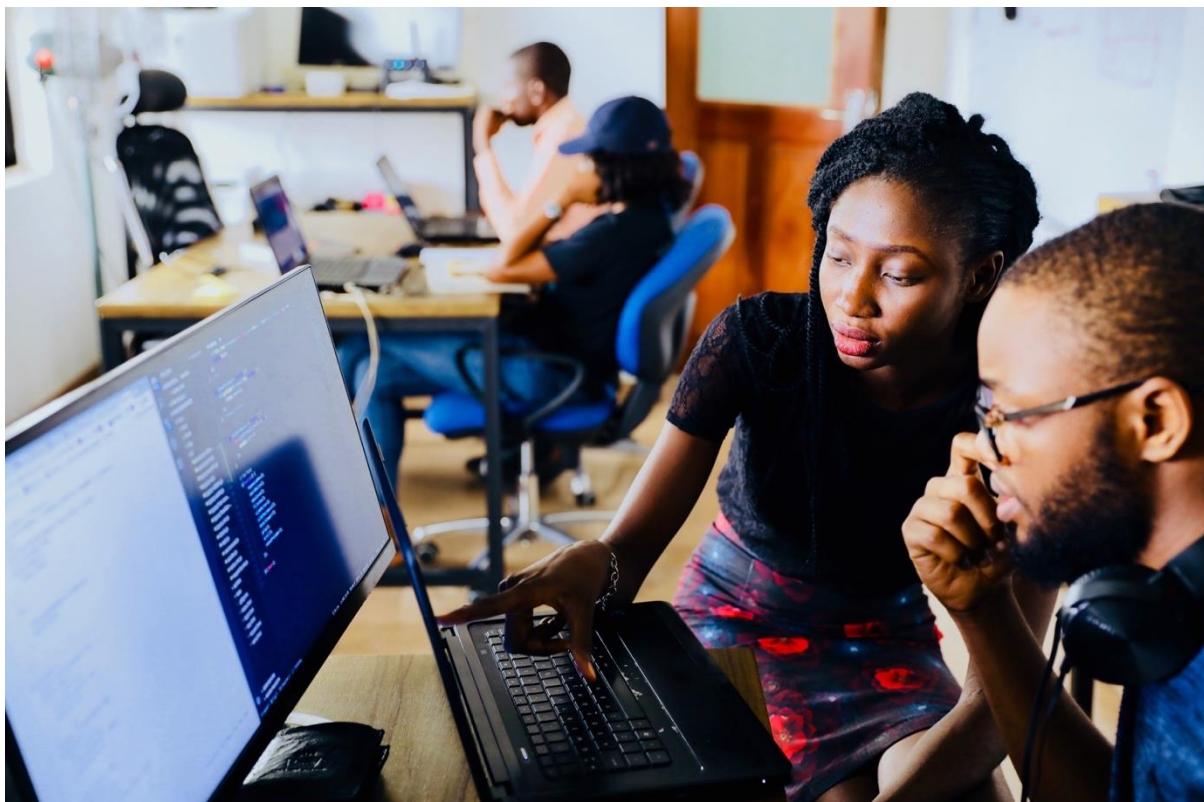
4.2 How has a more evidence-informed culture been achieved?

This section seeks to unpack how the Scottish higher education sector has created a more evidence-informed culture. This is particularly useful to individual institutions and other jurisdictions and countries that would like to follow suit. In summary, staff and students have worked collaboratively and with QAAS to:

- improve the quality of the data collected, especially through student surveys, and engage with the evidence
- 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 use data and evidence, both through small-scale projects and through processes such as annual review, and
- evaluate the impact of interventions and changes and disseminate the evidence to others.

The work has been underpinned by collaboration both within institutions and across the sector, but collaboration is more than a means of working: it also contributed directly to developing the motivation, networks and capacity of staff to engage with and use data and evidence.

4.2.1 Improve the quality of data collected

A number of institutions identified areas where they would like to improve the quality of the data and evidence available to enhance the student experience; much of this work has focused on student feedback, especially via surveys. Institutions use surveys as an important way of gathering feedback from students, and listening to and responding to student voice is a sector-wide priority. It is therefore not surprising that improving the quality of data collected in this way was one of the most common activities across the higher education institutions. The effort has focused on increasing the number of students who contribute to surveys, by improving survey processes and helping students to see the value of sharing their views and experiences, at least in part by closing the feedback loop. Some examples of the work undertaken by Scottish HEIs are presented below.

Over the course of the Theme, Heriot-Watt University's institutional Enhancement Theme team undertook a review of their cross-institutional student survey processes (Student Survey Framework). A significant focus of the review was on enhancing institutional mechanisms to respond effectively to students' feedback on their learning experience. The review concluded by making 20 recommendations for institutional action. Heriot-Watt University's institutional Committee for Learning and Teaching has taken forward action relating to 19 of the recommendations made from the review. This review of the Framework has resulted in a more consistent approach based on more coordination of surveys, including planning and follow-up actions; student-led design of course feedback surveys; and integrating surveys into teaching time before the end of the semester to allow feedback to students about the actions taken to close the feedback loop. A significant indicator of the success of this work is that the 'Student Voice' ratings of the NSS has risen by 7.8 percentage points between 2017 (66.7%) and 2019 (74.5%) (Heriot-Watt University In-depth evaluation).

The University of the Highlands and Islands established a surveys working group to examine the 'regional surveys' that take place across all academic partner institutions, in order to develop a common survey approach and to provide accessible data to a range of staff. This was achieved and resulted in a 'culture of collaboration and data sharing that did not

previously exist'. The University acknowledges that more work is now required to ensure that findings from student surveys inform decisions at institutional level, and that student understanding of the importance of their feedback is increased (University of the Highlands and Islands In-depth evaluation).

The University of Aberdeen focused on its Student Course Evaluation Form. An earlier move to online collection of data reduced the student response rate, and made staff reluctant to act on feedback as they felt it might not be representative. This lack of staff engagement further discouraged students from providing feedback. The University's Theme institutional team explored this issue and discovered that students felt the process was centralised and depersonalised, and was not useful to the academics that they engaged with. Similarly, the academic staff felt little ownership of the process and resorted to their own surveys. Meanwhile, administrative staff felt compelled to promote the survey so that it would not reflect badly on them. The key issues of lack of ownership, and clarity of how the evidence would be used, were identified and addressed:

> *Guidance was given on how to personalize the 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.*
> (University of Aberdeen In-depth evaluation)

Although the overall response rate declined in 2019-20 (probably as a result of COVID-19), in some parts of the University the rate improved, suggesting that a more personalised approach is the way forward.

At the Robert Gordon University, analysis of 2016-17 data indicated that although students felt they had appropriate opportunities to provide feedback, they were less clear as to how this was acted upon. The institution worked with students to undertake research about these issues, and a wide range of changes was made. Particularly important was local promotion of the survey to both increase engagement and to inform students about changes made in response to their feedback. Subsequently, over 400 more students provided feedback than previously, and over 3,000 additional qualitative comments were submitted; the NSS response rate increased to 80% in 2018 and 2019, whereas previously it had been a little over 50%. The NSS Student Voice category results increased by two percentage points, with results for the question, 'It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on', rising by five percentage points (Robert Gordon University Light-touch evaluation).

These examples reflect the different challenges and stages of development faced by different institutions. There are broad lessons that include more coordination of the student feedback process to ensure consistency and not over-burdening students; student involvement in the design of surveys; personalising messages to increase student engagement; and ensuring the feedback loop is closed and communicated to students - which has implications for the timing of surveys - to help students appreciate the value of sharing their views and experiences.

4.2.2   Make data more accessible

There are many examples of how institutions, collaborative clusters and sector-level projects have sought to make the data more accessible to staff groups, student representatives and the general student population. These include: gathering data resources together; presenting data in different ways; tailoring data to specific groups; and providing walk-through guides to specific data and evidence sources.

At the institutional level, this has involved significant projects to create data dashboards. While this has been a recent trend in UK higher education, the Theme has contributed to this

work in additional ways, including: defining and developing dashboard content; identifying the data that specific groups of staff require; and providing guidance to staff and students to encourage and support engagement with and use of data and evidence. More generally, increasing the appetite for data - an outcome of this Enhancement Theme - has aligned with, and complemented, the development of data dashboards across the Scottish higher education sector.

Dashboards bring data together in one place, making it more accessible and easier to use, with the expectation that this will result in greater engagement. For example, the University of the Highlands and Islands is confident that the use of data and evidence will increase in the future as the data dashboard is rolled out across all parts of the University (University of the Highlands and Islands Online focus group).

The work of the Learning Analytics Policy and Practice collaborative cluster contributed shared information from participating HEIs to support the process of dashboard development. Information about institutional goals, systems currently in place, and future plans, was collected and disseminated. This information was collated into a wiki that is publicly available, to facilitate sharing and promote collaboration in Scotland and beyond. Students' views were also canvassed through focus groups to explore expectations and concerns on learning analytics and how institutions might use and police student data. Collectively, the student perception was an overall positive stance towards learning analytics, although caution was advised around ethical issues on analysis of student data (cluster report on student perceptions across Scottish HEIs). The University of Dundee, the University of the West of Scotland and the University of Edinburgh reported that they are using the HE Data Landscape resource to support data dashboard developments (sector resource In-depth evaluation).

At Queen Margaret University (QMU), Theme work contributed to the development of the dashboard by simplifying the data available to staff. The QMU team developed the concept of 'Five Things'. A decision was taken to limit the data on the dashboard to just five items: age; gender; geographical (home, EU, international); module attendance to date; and module assessment attainment to date, so as not to overwhelm staff with more information. While this is straightforward data about the students in a class, previously it was either not available (it was only available by programme rather than by module), not easily accessible (often stored in more than one place, not all of which were available to academic staff), only available retrospectively or by request, or only partially complete (for example, attendance data was provided only for those students whose engagement with the programme had been flagged as a concern) (Queen Margaret University In-depth evaluation).

Other Theme projects made data available to specific groups of staff or students to help them to make greater use of it. For example, the Enhancing Programme Leadership collaborative cluster discussed and shared practice about data and information that can be used by staff undertaking this role. Both the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh focused on the provision of information and data for student representatives. Glasgow created a 'representation tool kit', which provides a one-stop-shop for class representatives about the role, while Edinburgh focused on data and evidence that is useful to student representatives. This information was presented visually to further support representatives in accessing and using the evidence (University of Glasgow Light-touch evaluation, University of Edinburgh In-depth evaluations).

A notable set of resources was generated at the sector level by QAA Scotland to inform different audiences about data and evidence, and to facilitate the use of evidence. For example, the HE Data Landscape resource is an interactive web page providing a guide to the higher education sector's key data sets for staff involved in managing academic quality. Thirteen guides on key data sources, collections and applications were developed, each with

a common structure. These help users to understand the type and scope of data, the questions the data can answer, available data analyses, and data limitations. The data guides are mapped in relation to specific academic quality activities: course and programme development; annual monitoring; Institution-led Review; Enhancement-led Institutional Review; student engagement; and professional, regulatory and statutory body activity. The launch of the HE Data Landscape resource was accompanied by a webinar (start of 2019) which supported the sector to use the resource. By the end of the Theme there were 889 visits to the resource web page, although the number of downloads of individual guides was small. Feedback from institutions suggests that engagement with the resources is greatest when it is targeted towards a specific group of staff, and facilitated through a development session engaging with these resources (sector resource: In-depth evaluation). This does suggest that simply making data and evidence accessible are necessary, but insufficient.

The Learning Analytics Discussion Papers were a sector-resource, derived from a review of empirical work and scholarship in learning analytics. This was identified at the start of the Theme as an area of interest, and the resource was intended to support staff and institutions wishing to develop work in this area. The review provided a large amount of information, which was divided into separate documents. The uptake of this resource has been limited, pointing to the need to both ensure there is a demand for a resource, and to think about how to engage staff in using it (sector resource: Light-touch evaluation)

Another sector-level resource, In-depth analysis of the Scottish sector National Student Survey performance, produced valuable information about the NSS data and also shared the analysis at sector-wide meetings and conferences. This increased engagement helped participants to consider how they could use the evidence to inform future enhancement work (sector resource: Light-touch evaluation).

Overall, the Theme undertook valuable work collating resources and making data and evidence more accessible, but this does need to be accompanied by not just promotion, but by being embedded into events and activities with staff and students.

4.2.3   Develop the capacity of staff and students to access, collect and utilise data and evidence

It is not enough to provide staff and students with access to data. Learning and teaching communities must be empowered and supported to use evidence effectively. As institutions have begun to make data more accessible to their learning communities, the need for staff and student training and guidance on the use of evidence has emerged as a priority action.

The University of Edinburgh provided its student representatives with School-level data from the NSS, Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) and Postgraduate Experience Research Survey (PRES) to support their understanding of the issues affecting learning and teaching in their Schools. The data sets were welcomed by the student representatives, who provided input on the format and guidance relating to the data, but they were not widely used. The minimal use of these data sets was attributed to a lack of support for student representatives to utilise the information effectively. Institutional training and activities to develop an understanding of data and its uses is essential for the effective use of evidence to enhance the student experience (University of Edinburgh In-depth evaluation).

The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS) was a little anxious about embarking on this Enhancement Theme, as engaging with evidence and data seemed daunting to some staff and students in a specialist arts institution. The institutional team therefore chose to 'use data to stimulate open conversation rather than to present any evaluation of the data' (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland Year 3 report).

RCS developed a set of questions that could be applied to any data to stimulate group conversation:

- What do you notice about the data?
- Is there anything surprising about the data?
- What do you think the data says?

And questions designed to stimulate personal reflection:

- What have you learned from the discussion about the data?
- Does this data raise any questions for you?
- Is there anything you will do differently now?

These questions were designed to build confidence and enable staff (and students) to engage with data and evidence.

The trepidation that the Theme Leader at RCS felt was perhaps more universal; helping to engage staff in discussion to develop confidence and understanding is vital. For example, Heriot-Watt University noted that:

> *In the early stages of the Theme, the sector-wide discussion around what did we mean by 'evidence' and what evidence would be useful to enhance practice were crucial in shaping institutional understanding and the planning of institutional work. In particular, the 'Staff Using Evidence' guide provided useful examples for both project leads and wider academic staff to consider what data or evidence was worth focusing on and how they might best collect or collate it.*
> (Heriot-Watt University Year 3 report)

Many of the sector-level activities aimed to guide and encourage engagement with data resources. Both the Student and Staff Guides to Using Evidence aimed to do this. The guides have been well-received, have been engaged with by a range of stakeholder groups and have been viewed and downloaded more than any other sector-level resources. This can be attributed to the work of QAAS and the authors in promoting the resources through events and social media, of particular importance are likely to have been running workshops on the guides at events, which resulted in increased views and downloads from the website. The evaluation evidence identifies that the guides are robust and thorough, and should be viewed as more than 'guides' as the interactive format is engaging and developmental. It is, however, noted that they are long, and so need to be divided into more digestible sections, especially if they are to be used in training. It is not possible to assess whether the guides have impacted on practice or the student experience.

Despite effective promotion and initial engagement by staff and students, there is a gap in the logic chain between providing high quality resources, and staff or students engaging with them and changing their practice. Resources such as this need to build in a strategy for active engagement. This is noted in the evaluation report:

> *One respondent suggested reframing the title of 'Guide' to reflect the interactive nature of the content. This should then be supplemented by workshops and a live, accredited programme at cross-institutional level with core and optional elements. Making links with key sector processes (e.g. REF/TEF) was key for the future application of the Guides.*
> (Sector In-depth evaluation)

One sector-level activity that sought to develop staff and students was the Upskilling series of 12 lunchtime webinars covering the nature of evidence, student engagement, specific types of data, and showcasing other Theme projects. The webinars had an average attendance of 31, and the videos (available on YouTube[3]) have subsequently had an average of 70 views. Feedback collected during the webinars (via polls, chat, and so on) suggests that they were of immediate benefit to participants, but it has been difficult to ascertain if they have had any medium or longer-term outcomes (sector In-depth evaluation). This has been true of other resources, although some comments suggest the resources have been useful and influenced practice. Edinburgh Napier University reported that the Quality & Standards team welcomed the *Top Tips for Engaging with Data in Annual Monitoring* resource:

> *These offer very practical and useful factors to consider as we continue to monitor and review the effectiveness of our annual monitoring processes.*
> (Edinburgh Napier University Year 3 report)

The Responding to Student Voice project discussed in section 4.1.1 seems to have been more effective in helping to engage staff with data and evidence. This may be due to the focus on the student voice, but also the 'principles of practice' discussion cards which provided a practical way to help staff and students engage with evidence and issues and train staff about how to respond to the student voice. In comparison, the majority of the other resources have collected information and provided guidance designed to develop the capacity of staff to use data and evidence, but they have not created an 'engagement mechanism' that facilitates staff development.

At the University of Strathclyde, a survey of programme leaders revealed a need to improve not only awareness of the data sources, but also awareness of how to access these data sources, the relevance of data, and the confidence and knowledge to use it effectively. There was a strong appetite among programme leaders for more training, and in particular for training in Strathclyde systems that would help them to use the University's data more effectively. A strand of development activities for programme leaders has been embedded into the Strathclyde Teaching Excellence Programme, an academic staff development pathway (University of Strathclyde In-depth evaluation).

Developing staff capacity is clearly crucial to increasing staff and students' awareness, confidence and ability to use data and evidence to enhance the learning experience. Scotland's Rural College has found that building development and training activities into existing networks and meetings has been the most effective approach to staff and student skills development in the use of evidence. The integration of the staff development workstream into existing forums (Heads of Department) and suite of training activities (Students' Association Induction and Training) meant that extra time was not being asked of participants. Its inclusion in existing forums and activities communicated the importance of the effective use of evidence as central to academic and student leadership roles (Scotland's Rural College Light-touch evaluation).

In conclusion, capacity development through guidance resources has had limited impact. More proactive training - embedded into other activities - has been more effective. Active learning strategies have also increased take-up. As the next section demonstrates, part of this capacity development has occurred not through formal training resources and events,

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[3] Enhancement Themes YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/user/EnhancementThemes

but through collaboration; learning from colleagues and with colleagues to solve data problems.

4.2.4   Working collaboratively

Working collaboratively underpins much of the work to improve the use of data and evidence within the higher education sector, and contributes to developing the capacity of staff and students to engage with data and evidence. Institutions worked collaboratively within their institutions and across the sector. Intra-institutional collaboration is discussed here as a way of addressing challenges in relation to data and evidence, and developing personal connections and expertise that contributed to developing the capacity of colleagues and the evolution of a more evidence-informed culture. Collaborative clusters operated as cross-institution collaborations and point to a valuable way of working within Enhancement Themes in general, and are discussed in section 6.3.

A number of institutions identified the importance of working collaboratively with others within the institution. For example, the Robert Gordon University states that, 'bringing together expertise from different parts of the institution in support of developing a core understanding of evidence for enhancement has had value in of itself' (Robert Gordon University Year 3 report). Other institutions frame it slightly differently, acknowledging that intra-organisational collaboration has a value, but also facilitates engagement with data and greater understanding.

For example, the Open University in Scotland explained how they embarked on an ambitious project to better understand differential attainment between students living in Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation Q1, and identified intersectional disadvantage to be significant. The work ran into challenges around locating and accessing the data required. The difficulties were overcome by working with others across the institution, and created a network of colleagues who continue to work together to use the evidence to inform interventions to address issues of intersectional disadvantage and lower rates of attainment (Open University in Scotland In-depth evaluation).

Similarly, Glasgow Caledonian University identified the importance of teams involving academics and staff from professional services working together and getting to know each other. This, they explain, creates personal relationships that facilitate staff accessing and utilising data and evidence. For example, when preparing for the ELIR in 2019-20, staff were able to use relationships developed through the Theme project to collect rich descriptions and evidence current practice from across the institution for their Reflective Analysis (Glasgow Caledonian University Year 3 report).

Another way in which collaboration can be beneficial was identified by Abertay University to increase the amount, quality and impact of pedagogical research within the University. The team sought to make greater use of the research expertise within the institution as a review of the impact of past pedagogic research projects funded by Enhancement Theme money demonstrated that funded projects have increased pedagogic research outputs and profile. This encouraged the team to find out about the expertise and evidence base within the institution, in order to try and grow the rigour and robustness of activity by mentoring and connecting colleagues with others doing work in this area. This, in turn, enabled the University to harness a more powerful evidence-based voice within the institution, but also across the sector, and to enrich, evolve and change practice in an evidence-led way (Abertay University Year 3 report).

The Open University in Scotland reported that working across the institution as part of the collaborative cluster work on Distance and Sense of Belonging Online Tutor Toolkit development promoted both internal as well as external collaboration, 'forming good working links between members of staff that often work separately'. The University notes that the

work 'allowed us to codify our knowledge and practice about sense of belonging - to move it from tacit to explicit knowledge' (cluster - Open University in Scotland Light-touch evaluation).

These insights into the contribution of intra-organisational collaboration suggest that not only is working across the institution useful, in some cases it is essential to solving challenging data and evidence-related problems. Furthermore, working together to address one particular issue nurtures relationships which can be productive in additional ways, and the process can validate and recognise expertise within the institution.

4.2.5 Dissemination and engagement with evidence of impact

The focus on evaluation, evidence and dissemination within this Theme has contributed to a more evidence-informed culture. The evaluation approach and evaluation evidence collected is detailed in section 3, and the contribution of evaluation to the Enhancement Theme process is discussed in section 6.4. Here, it is noted that the emphasis on identifying intermediate indicators has allowed project leaders to share evidence about changes that have been achieved before the conclusion of project work, and thus facilitated evidence-informed dissemination. Institutions have developed innovative approaches to disseminating their work.

The Open University in Scotland's (OUiS) institutional team has aimed to work with the wider Open University community to foster a culture of critical engagement with evidence, in all its forms, to improve student experience and outcomes. The OUiS shared evidence of what works to encourage internal dialogue, discussion and improvements in the following ways:

- knowledge exchange workshops on 'Wellbeing in the curriculum', and 'Equality, diversity and inclusion' were well attended
- monthly drop-in Fika[4] sessions, which provide opportunities for staff to showcase outcomes of evidence-informed projects and interventions, are now embedded in OUiS culture.

These activities have benefitted staff understanding of data and how it can be used to inform practice, and evidence about enhancing a sense of belonging and community among distance learning students has been shared. This enables colleagues to be better able to intervene and support students. As a result, evidence-based interventions will improve the student experience (Open University in Scotland Year 3 report).

Conversely, the Robert Gordon University has used existing core mechanisms to disseminate the work of the Theme. For example, active use of standing committees (Learning Infrastructure Sub-Committee, Teaching Learning and Assessment Sub-Committee and Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee) to distribute core messages; briefings to Heads of School, for onward circulation as appropriate; inclusion of related sessions within the continuing professional development offer; messages within the regular institutional outputs of the Communications Team; and showcases of the Theme's work via the annual learning and teaching conference. One specific event was organised, bringing together Heads of academic areas, professional services and student leaders to hear directly from project leads. It encouraged colleagues to reflect on how the University could continue to support effective self-reflection promoting the analysis of evidence for enhancement purposes (Robert Gordon University Year 3 report).

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[4] Fika - a Swedish term meaning making time for friends and colleagues to share a cup of coffee (or tea) and a little something to eat.

Overall, disseminating evidence of impact is an essential strategy to contribute to the development of an evidence-informed culture. Dissemination is most effective when it uses both existing institutional mechanisms and ones that are project-specific.

4.2.6   Summary

This section has provided details and examples about how a more evidence-informed culture has been achieved in Scottish higher education. The key points are to:

- make data and evidence more easily accessible
- develop staff and students' capacity (understanding, skills and confidence) to use the information
- improve the quality of the data collected, especially from student surveys
- encourage and facilitate collaborative working across the institution and within the sector
- undertake and disseminate evaluations to improve learning from the evidence.

Achieving a more evidence-informed culture is expected to improve the student experience. This aspect is examined in the next section.

5   Improving the student experience

As identified in section 4, the impact of this work to date has been to create a more evidence-informed culture within higher education in Scotland. The longer-term goal of this work is to meaningfully enhance the student experience. Within the three years that this Theme operated, 2017 to 2020, there has been modest evidence of impact on the student experience, as it takes time for changes that are implemented to have an impact. Much of the work - as described in section 4 - has operated to improve the data and evidence available, and the capacity of staff and students to utilise this information. There is, however, evidence in relation to specific institutions and projects through qualitative feedback and some early metrics, that the changed culture is improving the student experience (as illustrated in figures 6 and 7). In this section of the report, evidence-informed examples are presented from across the student journey of how 'evidence is enhancing the student experience'. Drawing on these examples and other evidence in this report, an impact pathway for the Theme has been created and is presented in section 5.2. Finally, this section explores the sustainability of the changes made, and offers optimism that in the future, there will be further improvements to the student experience and outcomes as a result of the 'evidence-informed culture' within Scottish higher education that has been ignited by this Enhancement Theme.

5.1   Examples of impact on the student experience

This section draws on case studies from institutions to illustrate the operation of the impact pathway and demonstrate how the Theme has impacted on the student experience.

5.1.1   Access to higher education - University of St Andrews
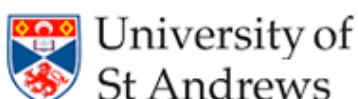
As part of the University of St Andrews' institutional enhancement work, they researched, developed and evaluated a set of resources for the University's widening access programme, First Chances (University of St Andrews' In-depth evaluation). The project aim was to provide local school pupils with a revitalised online tool and supplementary study support resources to aid the improvement of exam attainment outcomes and better prepare students for university study. The resources were complemented by subject-specific workshops, delivered by academic Schools and Units at the University of St Andrews. The project team's belief was that improving students' attainment at school would increase the rate of progression to university. It was hoped that the University's delivery of the project would raise awareness of St Andrews as an option for local students.

- **Short-term benefits:** Positive workshop feedback shows pupils engaged with, and benefitted from, the workshops and resources. Feedback illustrates that 94% of respondents stated that the First Chances project helped to increase their aspirations in life, with 76.5% saying that the project confirmed that university was right for them and 11.8% saying it made them consider university when they had not before. 100% of parents/guardians agreed that First Chances helped their child to prepare for academic study; 100% of First Chances pupils also agreed. 100% of the S6s exiting the programme said the project increased their self-confidence with their studies and academic ability, with 77% stating that First Chances helped with their performance in school exams.
- **Medium-term outcomes:** Attainment data shows that at the end of 2018-19, First Chances pupils' academic attainment was higher than the national average: S4s' National 5 attainment was 17% higher than average; S5s Highers' attainment was

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19% higher than average, and S6s Advanced Highers' attainment was 16% higher than average.

- **Longer-term impact:** The evidence from the first year of students using the resources found that 2% more students progressed to further or higher education than in previous years.

The University is exploring rolling out the resources to more schools in Fife and Scotland, and developing resources to support students studying in colleges. The team is hoping that the work will be recognised as an example of best practice in widening access and transition.

5.1.2 Community and belonging - Edinburgh Napier University

Edinburgh Napier University introduced a series of mini-projects to develop community and belonging in local contexts with the overall goal of improving students' sense of belonging (Edinburgh Napier University In-depth evaluation).

Over the course of the Theme, the focus of the projects evolved. Projects in the first year were broadly exploratory in nature and aimed to enhance understanding of community and belonging in different contexts within the University. Year 2 projects were more action-based and involved piloting interventions for particular student populations to enhance community and belonging and improve the student experience. Year 3 projects aimed to build on this previous activity, with a focus on developing existing projects and broadening these to include more staff and students.

The projects generated insights about what community is and understanding about the process. The work found that '…community is perceived at Edinburgh Napier University as something that enriches the learning experience but also students' wellbeing while at university' (Edinburgh Napier University in-depth evaluation). The small-scale size of the projects enabled staff and students to make significant changes, benefitting themselves and others. They found that encouraging student engagement and participation across years of study to be a particularly effective approach to project work. Similarly, the small size of the projects empowered staff to take risks and feel that project aspirations were manageable.

- **Short-term benefits:** Students developed employability skills and better relationships with staff. Staff valued the sense of community developed and gained personally and professionally. The lack of time for these projects, as they were not included in staff workloads, was found to be a challenge.
- **Medium-term outcomes:** Across the course of the Theme, there has been increased activity and interest in community and belonging in a variety of contexts. The mini-projects served to foreground this issue and create conversations within the institution. The COVID-19 pandemic further galvanised discussions around this topic, with an emphasis on supporting online learning communities. There is now a more explicit institutional commitment to community and belonging as a result of the mini-projects, which is supported in various metrics. The University performed very strongly in NSS 2020, with overall student satisfaction of 86% (compared to 80% the year before the start of the Enhancement Theme). Responses to question 21, regarding community and belonging, increased to 68% (+7%) across the course of the Theme.

- **Long-term impact:** The goal is to achieve a strong strategic institutional narrative around learning communities, the need to build a sense of belonging, and the diversity of student interests and needs. This institutional narrative must then be embedded into learning and teaching at module, programme, and school level. The intention is to create a culture, throughout the University, of staff and student belonging to diverse and inclusive learning communities.

While the improvements in NSS scores cannot simply be attributed to these mini-projects, or to the Enhancement Theme, the evidence from the individual evaluations and from a meta-evaluation suggests that they contributed to this outcome at least in some local contexts. Careful introduction of mini-projects into areas with low levels of student satisfaction outcomes could further increase the impact on community and belonging of similar, small-scale interventions led by staff and students.

5.1.3 Assessment review - University of the Highlands and Islands

University of the Highlands and Islands
Oilthigh na Gàidhealtachd agus nan Eilean

The Learning and Teaching Academy (LTA) at the University of the Highlands and Islands worked closely with two programme teams - Geography and Fine Art - to address issues raised in student feedback. LTA explored assessment-related issues and introduced small initiatives to address the identified issues through workshops and/or development days (University of the Highlands and Islands In-depth evaluation).

- **Short-term benefits:** Development days raised awareness of the data and issues with a wider staff group beyond programme leaders. Survey feedback gathered from the development days showed that staff understanding of the NSS had increased as a result of the events and that staff indicated that they were more likely to seek out the results of student surveys in the future.
- **Medium-term outcomes:** Both programme teams adopted changes as a result of the development days. Geography reviewed the assessment spread across the degree programme as a whole and altered the assessment method in two modules to ensure that there was a proportionate level of assessment by group work across the three years of the degree. In addition, the team undertook a review of the grading methods within those modules that employ group work and issued a student survey to gather views on the perceived fairness of these grading methods. This informed a programme-wide approach to the grading of group work which will be implemented when the programme undergoes revalidation in 2020.

Fine Art adopted the assessment rubric across the programme which has resulted in a more consistent assessment experience for students. Discussions concerning networked benchmarking led to the adoption of a new method for students to record their practical work online via a shared, informal image gallery. As well as facilitating the sharing of students' practical work across sites to enable holistic conversations about moderation/quality to take place, this has the additional benefit of giving students a portfolio of evidence of their practical work.

- **Longer-term impact:** National Student Survey scores for Assessment and Feedback improved within both programmes over the period in which the interventions took place: Geography: 82% in 2019 to 93% in 2020; Fine Art: 48% in 2019 to 65% in 2020.

In addition to increased student satisfaction, a number of unintended consequences were identified. Individual staff members became familiar with the work of LTA and engaged with subsequent events and initiatives. One member of a programme team successfully gained a place on the Advance HE Aurora programme as a result of her engagement in LTA events and initiatives. With both programmes being networked (delivered across multiple sites), there was a benefit in making the time for staff members to come together as a team, which happens very rarely in the institution, and to discuss issues of relevance. LTA benefitted by facilitating the development days, which will continue as a model of successful engagement in the future.

5.1.4   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 (Heriot-Watt University Year 3 report).

- **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 SSA, 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.

5.2   Impact pathway

Many of the enhancement activities have acted upon staff, and some have involved students in the change process, while other interventions have acted directly upon students (for example, encouraging them to participate in feedback surveys). These activities often result in better data collection or better use of evidence by staff, some encourage students to provide feedback or engage with evidence, while others encourage students or their representatives to make better use of the evidence available. These outcomes lead to more evidence-informed policies, processes and decision-making at individual, programme and institutional levels. This in turn informs changes to the student experience at local or institutional level. These changes **in time** are likely to improve the student experience and this might be observed through indicators relating to student satisfaction, continuation and progression, attainment, and graduate outcomes, as well as intangible outcomes as explored by the Intangibles collaborative cluster.

The impact pathway can be summarised in a revised narrative summary for the Evidence for Enhancement Theme.

Theory of change for Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the student experience

If higher education institutions or a national agency undertake activities to:

- make data more accessible
- improve the capacity of staff and students to access, collect and utilise data and evidence
- improve the quality of data collected
- encourage and facilitate collaboration within and between institutions across the higher education sector to solve data challenges, create personal connections and develop staff agency, and
- disseminate evidence about the impact of changes and interventions.

Then, a more evidence-informed culture will be created. This will be indicated by:

- greater use of evidence
- evidence-informed policies and processes
- embedded processes to collect and use data and evidence
- evidence-informed planning and decision-making, and
- evidence-informed practice.

If a more evidence-informed culture is created, then institutions, academic schools, programmes, students' associations/unions, staff and students will make changes that result in improvements to the student experience and outcomes. This will be evidenced by student feedback and outcomes such as:

- student engagement
- student belonging
- student satisfaction
- student continuation and completion
- student attainment.

As different activities contribute to outcomes and impact in a combination of ways, the logic of this work has become complex. This is illustrated in a diagram (see figure 8), rather than a logic chain, which aims to convey the complexity and richness of the impact of the Evidence for Enhancement Theme.

Figure 8: Increasing complexity of the Theme logic chain
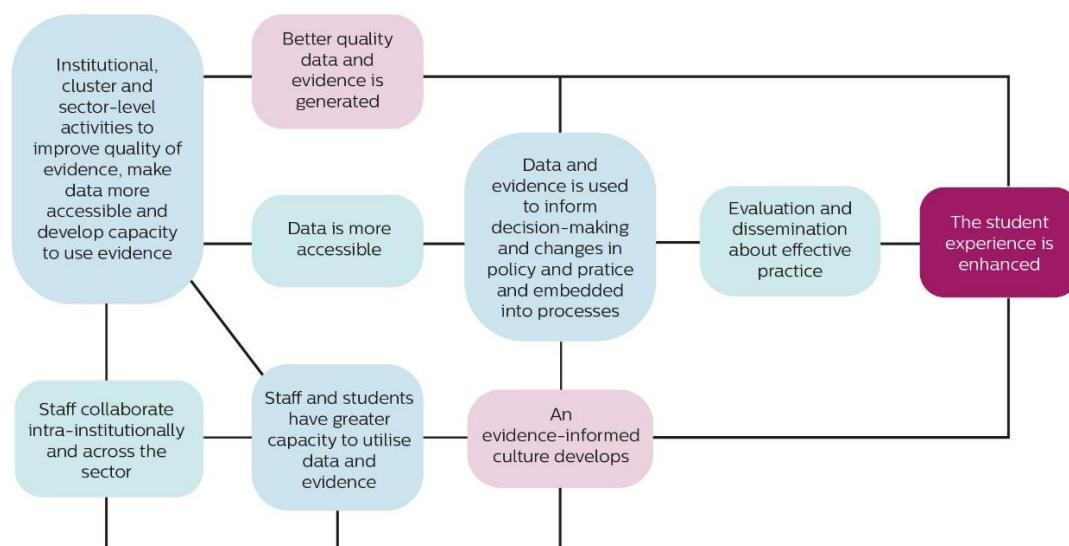
5.3   Sustainability beyond this Theme

Many of the in-depth and light-touch evaluations demonstrate that short-term benefits and medium-term outcomes have been achieved, in addition to some positive unintended consequences. Some interventions, such as those detailed in section 5.1, have already made a demonstrable impact on the student experience across the student journey. The impact pathway, as described in section 5.2, illustrates that it is likely that, in time, there will be more evidence of the positive impacts of Theme projects on the student experience and student outcomes. The sector's commitment to continuing the work of this Enhancement Theme is strong in the institutional annual and evaluation reports.

First, as discussed above in section 4, the creation of a more evidence-informed culture will ensure that data and evidence are drawn upon as a matter of course to inform planning and decision-making about policies, processes and practices. This is recognised across the sector:

> *The legacy of this Theme will be in the continued importance of evidence to underpin decision-making and enhancement activities. We have built the use of evidence into many of our processes and will continue to do so. Our new cycle of Institutional-led Reviews, for example, will build on the Theme work and the use of evidence to underpin reflection.*
> (Abertay University Year 3 report)
>
> *…our enhanced understanding of the data we hold and how it can be interrogated will impact many of the evidence-based decisions we make in the future and, as such, will have a considerable legacy within the university.*
> (University of St Andrews Year 3 report)

Second, much of the practical work, both improving the student experience and enhancing data collection and use, is still in progress and will continue beyond the life of this Theme. The sector's dedication to continuing to progress this work is demonstrated in year-end institutional reports, as well as project evaluations. For example:

> *Work on many of the initiatives and activities will continue within the University once the Theme had formally concluded.*
> (University of Edinburgh Year 3 report)
>
> *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 Year 3 report)
>
> *The Evidence for Enhancing Theme has also embedded an awareness within the OUiS and has challenged staff and students to examine the way they use data, both consciously and unconsciously. The Theme provided a starting point for many pilot projects, which will continue successfully as the Theme comes to an end.*
> (Open University in Scotland Year 3 report)

Scotland's Rural College provides a specific example of how it will continue to invest its efforts and the anticipated impact:

> *The longer-term impact of the project is that SRUC will continue to develop mid-term module surveys to allow students to impact their learning experience through active enhancement of the module delivery. This will benefit the student experience at the time but will also impact on the following cohort's learning experience. It enriches the data/evidence available for the teaching team for their reflective practice. We know this from the focus groups following the pilot sessions, from the feedback from the teaching colleagues who utilised mid module survey and from the post-pilot evaluation.*
> (Scotland's Rural College Light-touch evaluation)

There are a number of reasons why this Theme is likely to be sustained beyond its duration and have a lasting impact on higher education in Scotland. One reason is the breadth of staff engaged in the Theme, which is noted by several institutions. For example:

> *Enhanced relationships between academic and professional services staff, and students/Students' Association. There is now a culture of assembling cross-institutional teams to address strategic priorities and challenges and there are a number of end-to-end examples of evidence led change that can serve as a blueprint for future effort.*
> (Glasgow Caledonian University Year 3 report)
>
> *Within Heriot-Watt, this Theme engaged a much wider range of staff in Theme activities than previous Themes and we expect that this breadth of engagement will continue into the next Theme. The focus on evidence and critical reflection on practice will remain central as we move into next Theme, and within our institutional plan, we will have a specific work stream on Evidencing Resilience.*
> (Heriot Watt University Year 3 report)

A second reason, alluded to in the above comment, is that the Theme promoted greater reflection through the integration of evaluation into the design and delivery of Theme activities. Institutions found that embedding evaluation in Theme activities emphasised the importance of evaluative and reflective activity.

> *This Enhancement Theme has helped us to understand the importance of evidence in enhancement generally. The Theme has made us think about data, what data we have and how we could use it effectively with a view to enhancing the student experience; that mindset was not apparent in other Themes. The Theme's focus on evidence and evaluation has encouraged greater focus on evaluation at the outset of institutional and cross-institutional projects. Arguably, previous Themes would have benefitted from this understanding if we had that focus then.*
> (University of Aberdeen Year 3 report)
>
> *One reflection on this approach has been on the importance of factoring in evaluation plans from the outset. As we are planning for the next Enhancement Theme, it is already apparent that greater consideration of evidence for evaluation is influencing the Institutional Team's thinking.*
> (Edinburgh Napier University Year 3 report)

This Theme has created transformational change in the use of data and evidence for future Enhancement Themes, institutional work to enhance the student experience, and across institutions. This change should be considered a one-way door, or threshold concept, that cannot be undone once it has occurred. If this proves to be the case, then the sustainability of the impact of this Theme is assured.

6 How change and impact have been achieved - organisational factors

This section aims to explore the organisational factors that have contributed to the effective implementation of this Enhancement Theme and which have relevance to the delivery of future Enhancement Themes. The section covers institutional organisation, student involvement, sector-wide collaboration and evaluation. These factors are broader and more generic than the issues identified in section 4.2 where the focus was on the achievement of an evidence-informed culture through the current Theme.

6.1 Institutional organisation

The organisation of the Enhancement Themes empowers individual institutions to manage their institutional Enhancement Theme work in a way that reflects their institutional culture and context. This enables institutions to tailor their institutional teams, approaches and projects to the unique environment of their university. While each institution may take a different approach to the management of their Theme work, they all must address these common challenges: the importance of the alignment of Theme work with institutional priorities; the value of utilising existing organisational structures; the design of the institutional Enhancement Theme team; and potential uses of institutional Theme funding.

6.1.1 Alignment with institutional priorities

Institutions widely reported that aligning Enhancement Theme work with existing institutional priorities helped to create momentum and cross-institutional buy-in, which resulted in increasing the impact of Theme-related activity. Institutions have reported that it was easier to align their Theme work with the institutional priorities and strategies.

As the Theme evaluation did not explore whether it was easier to align the Evidence for Enhancement Theme work with institutional priorities, definitive conclusions on this phenomenon cannot be made. However, the flexibility of the Theme's topic and its timeliness are certainly likely to have contributed to a natural alignment of Theme work to emerging institutional priorities.

In addition, some institutions offered organisational explanations, unique to their institutional context, such as the centralisation of institutional management of Theme work.

Heriot-Watt University described the positive impact of introducing a dedicated unit within the University, with responsibility for the management and delivery of Theme activities:

> *The creation of the Learning and Teaching Academy has had a significant impact on ensuring that the Theme activities are more aligned with, and connected to, both the University's strategic considerations on teaching and learning as well as staff development activities in teaching and learning. The range of new activities undertaken by the Learning and Teaching Academy ensures a wider reach and significantly enhanced connections across the University. This is especially evident in the increased interest in Themes activity across all our campuses, evidence by the multi-campus focus and leadership of Theme projects.*
> (Heriot Watt University Year 3 report)

Similarly, at Scotland's Rural College, the management and coordination of the Theme became centrally located and responsibility for this work formally integrated into job roles, which facilitated strategic alignment and collaboration:

> *With SRUC's extensive restructure came the opportunity to write Enhancement Theme activity into staff remits. The Academic Enhancement (Student Journey) team are now formally responsible for leading and coordinating Theme activity within SRUC. This change is intended to create stronger alignment between Theme and institutional strategic activity as well as consistency across Theme management. Changes have already been seen owing to this, including a more collaborative planned approach to the development of institutional activity for the next Theme.*
> (Scotland's Rural College Year 3 report)

These examples from Heriot-Watt University and Scotland's Rural College demonstrate that having a named, centrally located team responsible for the coordination, management and delivery of Enhancement Theme activities supports the alignment of institutional Theme work with institutional strategy.

In considering the coordination and management of institutional Theme work, some universities wondered whether they were spreading themselves too thinly by undertaking too many projects under the Enhancement Theme banner. Abertay University addressed this potential issue by undertaking a smaller number of projects than in previous Themes, which were clearly aligned to institutional priorities. Linking Theme projects to institutional priorities resulted in the responsibility for Theme activities being dispersed over a larger number of people. Abertay University has reported that this approach worked well and that it plans to continue utilising it in the new Enhancement Theme (Abertay University Year 3 report).

The University of Stirling similarly undertook a small number of larger projects aligned with institutional priorities. The University reflected that while this provided it with access to greater support and resource, it also resulted in less control of the direction and ownership of the work. The University wrote:

> *We have undertaken work that was already identified as strategically important to the University, rather than creating projects inspired by the Theme, as we have done in the past. This has therefore allowed us to tackle larger projects, which require institutional resource and backing. However, it has had the challenge of less local control over the direction of some of the projects, due to their size and nature.*
> (University of Stirling Year 3 report)

Alignment of Enhancement Theme work with institutional priorities is generally viewed positively. However, this seems to require more centralised control to ensure that alignment occurs and tends to result in a smaller number of possibly larger projects taking place. The University of Stirling's institutional team noted that an unintended consequence was less local control of the projects and this could certainly be detrimental in engaging a wider breadth of staff and students across the institution. Exploring approaches that achieve greater alignment and 'institutional support' while maximising wide engagement of staff across the institution would be valuable.

6.1.2 Utilising existing organisational structures

Several institutions identified the value of utilising existing institutional structures to both coordinate Theme work and promote wider staff and student engagement. This is easier when the Enhancement Theme activities are aligned with institutional priorities. Glasgow Caledonian University shared that:

> *The main aim of this Theme - evidencing enhancement of, and improvement in the student experience - is wholly coherent with the strategic goals and priorities of GCU, particularly our Student Experience Action Plan (SEAP) with which it is aligned and integrated. The SEAP is overseen by the Enhancing the Student Experience (EtSE) Steering Group which provides an established infrastructure to support our Theme activity. This approach has been consistent throughout the three years of the Theme… The close integration of Enhancement Theme activities with wider University structures such as the SEAP has ensured a coherent approach to our Theme activity.*
> (Glasgow Caledonian University Year 3 report)

Similarly, Heriot-Watt University found that its institutional team membership supported the utilisation of existing institutional structures for dissemination of and engagement with institutional Theme activity. The University wrote:

> *Over the course of the Theme, our Institutional Team has worked well. The links from the team into the University's structures has ensured visibility and strategic alignment. The funded projects have enabled significant breadth of participation of staff and students in Theme activities. Our present Theme activity has many strengths on which we will continue to build as we enter the next Theme. We will continue to explore broadening the base of participation and the tightness of strategic alignment as we work through the new Theme.*
> (Heriot-Watt University Year 3 report)

A clear benefit of utilising existing institutional structures is the ability to engage large numbers of staff and students. Scotland's Rural College utilised student academic representative systems and the students' association to engage broad networks of students in Theme activity (Scotland's Rural College Year 3 report). The University of Dundee, in turn, emphasised that use of its Student Partnership Agreement to maintain and reflect its positive working relationship with its students' association supported clear communication about Theme work with the wider student community (University of Dundee Year 3 report).

Existing committee structures and networks made the creation and dissemination of Theme-related work to staff populations easier for the Universities of Stirling and Dundee (University of Stirling Year 3 report, University of Dundee Year 3 report). The University of Glasgow outlined the use of institutional annual monitoring processes to cascade information on Theme activity across the institution, ensuring that it reached all academic Schools (University of Glasgow Year 3 report).

These examples serve to demonstrate the value of communicating and disseminating information relating to Enhancement Theme work through existing institutional structures, rather than creating distinct committees or communication channels for this work. It should still be noted that there is a value to complementing this use of existing institutional structures with discrete Enhancement Theme project-related events.

6.1.3   Small central Enhancement Theme team

Many institutions actively reflected on the size of their institutional Enhancement Theme team. While a large group has the advantage of engaging a wider staff group and involving more units of the institution, on balance, most institutions have concluded that a smaller central coordinating team is the best solution. The University of St Andrews stated that:

> *The large institutional team, which met three times per semester was replaced with a small steering group, consisting of strand-leads, which met once per month. The strand-leads were supported by students and staff from the wider institute as work necessitates. The streamlined approach brought about several benefits…chiefly in allowing our work to be agile and responsive as the Theme developed… However, this also necessitates careful thought as to how a wide range of University students and staff can engage with the Theme… It is important to build resilience into the team leading the Theme so that unexpected changes or events do not limit the capacity to progress work.*
> (University of St Andrews Year 3 report)

A small team can present its own challenges, particularly in withstanding membership changes and effectively engaging the wider staff and student communities in the Theme work. The University of Aberdeen reflected that:

> *The Centre for Academic Development continues to be central to the delivery and dissemination of Theme-related activities. The Centre organises monthly meetings with all School Directors of Teaching and Learning to apprise them of new developments, for example to the VLE, or to the rebranded student course feedback process, but also to provide a discussion forum to facilitate the sharing of practice and concerns. This format was enhanced during our move to a blended learning environment by assigning a specific member of the Centre with educational development/eLearning expertise (with a small team of Centre staff to ensure continuity of support) to each School to support their move to online delivery of teaching and assessment. The availability of this named person to be a source of information and support to staff has been invaluable and will continue throughout the academic year.*
> (University of Aberdeen Year 3 report)

These institutional reflections suggest that a smaller centralised team that utilises institutional structures to manage activity and communicate with staff and students is the optimal way of organising institutional Enhancement Theme work. This approach allows greater alignment with institutional priorities and appears to be effective in engaging the wider student and staff communities.

6.1.4   Using the funding effectively

Institutions receive a small amount of funding annually from QAA Scotland for their institutional Enhancement Theme work. Across the sector, institutions report that they have used the funding in a range of ways, including the funding of small projects, employing student researchers and employing a dedicated Enhancement Themes coordinator. Each approach has merits that are worthy of consideration by other institutions, particularly to maximise the benefits of Enhancement Theme funding and resourcing.

Quite a few institutions use the funding for small projects, which are usually awarded through a competitive process, and encourage wider staff and student engagement with the Enhancement Themes. Edinburgh Napier University reflected on its experience of using the funding to support small projects, stating that:

> *The approach to use Enhancement Theme resources to fund a wider variety of small-scale projects across the University and the Students Association has been a noted success of this Enhancement Theme. It has engaged a wider body of the University community in the work of the Theme and generated a rich and diverse range of outcomes.*
> (Edinburgh Napier University Year 3 report)

The University of Dundee identified additional advantages of funding small projects, including developmental opportunities for staff, encouraging cross-working within the institution and promoting scholarship.

> *We have made excellent use of our yearly funding. We distributed modest amounts to small-scale projects which had a series of benefits: they encouraged engagement with the Theme; they provided developmental opportunities for colleagues, especially those on T&S contracts. They promoted inter-School and cross-institutional collaboration and helped to bolster our annual discussion around the meaning and value of scholarship within the Institution.*
> (University of Dundee Year 3 report)

It does seem that allocating funds to small projects that are aligned to institutional priorities and Enhancement Themes is a useful strategy to engage staff and students, provide development opportunities and impact on the student experience.

Another approach to the use of institutional Enhancement Theme funding was the securing of additional staff resource to coordinate and deliver projects. The University of the Highlands and Islands chose to use the project funding to employ a dedicated coordination post, which it has reflected positively upon.

> *I am writing as Chair at the unanimous request of the university's QAA Enhancement Theme Steering Group with some observations about how this iteration of the ongoing initiative ran. This was the first time that the support from the QAA was used to provide a dedicated resource to support the university's response to the QAA Enhancement Theme, and in brief, it was deemed to be a resounding success. The Steering Group feels that having a named individual to engage themselves, as well as coordinate the work of others, has significantly contributed to the success of these linked projects. The steering group would like to recommend that a similar approach be adopted for further iterations of the QAA Enhancement Theme initiative.*
> (Dr Gary Campbell, 3 August 2020, University of the Highlands and Islands Year 3 report)

Another use of funding for institutional projects was the employment of student interns, as utilised at the University of Stirling, University of Strathclyde and Scotland's Rural College. This approach provided opportunities for students to be directly involved in the delivery of the Enhancement Theme activities, generated useful research evidence, and provided the students involved with valuable developmental opportunities.

> *For workstreams 1 and 3, we employed two undergraduate student research interns. These interns, with support from the institutional team, designed and conducted evaluation-based research projects, recommendations from which are being implemented. This was a successful move: the student research interns produced excellent outputs that will impact on how SRUC delivers the student experience in future years; it placed students at the heart of organisational development; and it provided the students with the opportunity to develop their own personal skills and competencies.*
> (Scotland's Rural College Year 3 report)

There is a clear benefit to each of these approaches to utilising institutional funding for Enhancement Theme activity. Institutions should consider the various ways that they might spend their funding to support the planned outputs and to engage wider student and staff communities in their delivery. This consideration needs to take account of institutional context so that approaches are appropriately customised.

6.2   Student involvement

Increasing student engagement in Enhancement Theme activity has been a priority throughout Evidence for Enhancement. Opportunities have been intentionally created to empower greater involvement from student representatives. The Theme Leaders' Group membership continued in its expanded form (from the end of the Student Transitions Theme) to include a student representative from each Scottish HEI, ensuring equal staff and student representation on the Group. A sector-level student-led project was introduced in Evidence for Enhancement to empower student ownership of Enhancement Theme projects at a national level. Similarly, institutions have encouraged the creation of student-led projects and events, which offer students and staff opportunities to work together and learn from each other. Students continue to be active in shaping institutional policies, strategies and processes relating to Theme activity, undertaking independent research into emerging issues, presenting findings at institutional committees and running consultations of the wider student community.

Little evidence on the student experience of Evidence for Enhancement was provided by students, as part of this evaluation activity so conclusions on the student experience, whether positive or negative, are limited. In future Theme evaluation activities, an emphasis should be placed on gathering student feedback on their involvement in Theme activity throughout the lifecycle of the Theme.

6.2.1   Student representation on the TLG

Students and staff having equal representation on the TLG has been beneficial and partially effective. This structure provides a formal route for student engagement, and in some cases this has been very effective; for example at Heriot-Watt University, where full engagement by the institutional student representative in this Theme has benefitted the Students' Union, and wider student engagement. Furthermore, the institutional student representative is now the student member leading the next Enhancement Theme.

> *We have also benefited from having a senior officer of our student union as the Theme Student Lead. This has ensured that the student union planning and decision making is informed by the Theme and that any opportunities for our students to benefit from the Theme activities are explored. This enhanced engagement has resulted in significant student engagement with a number of exercises run to capture the student voice on a different elements related to the Theme.*
> (Heriot-Watt University Year 3 report)

In other contexts, institutional student representatives have not always attended meetings, or played a full role in the Theme Leadership. Student engagement levels and consistency vary between institutions and on an annual basis. This variance may reflect the differing interests of individual student leaders, as well as the way in which institutions seek to involve students in the Theme. The University of Aberdeen stated:

> *Supporting student engagement has been less easy. Student engagement in two projects…has been reported in last year's Theme report… In the final year of the Theme we did not have the same level of student engagement, having not been able to replace two of the previous student representatives on the team.* (University of Aberdeen Year 3 report)

Interviews with institutional student representatives demonstrated a range of knowledge and understanding about the Enhancement Theme. It is clear that some institutions and/or students' associations/unions provide students with a comprehensive brief on Enhancement Theme activity within the institution and the wider sector. Other institutions and students' associations/unions may not provide similar training. Clarity of the role of students, whether in individual projects or in the Theme more broadly, is essential to the effective operation of an Enhancement Theme. Interestingly, student representatives raised in the interview that they had a better understanding of their role and contribution when asked to consult on specific projects. In contrast, when tasked with creating and launching a project on their own, they spoke of a lack of understanding of their role and contribution to the wider Theme.

Ensuring a continuity of student engagement throughout the entirety of a Theme is essential to students feeling a sense of ownership of the Theme. Different institutional approaches to ensuring continuity may be beneficial given different, distinct institutional contexts. However, institutions should be encouraged to regularly review and evaluate their approach to supporting student engagement, introducing new and innovative models of student engagement where needed.

6.2.2 Student-led projects

QAA Scotland introduced a student-led project initiative in the Evidence for Enhancement Theme to encourage greater student engagement and ownership of Theme activity at a national level. The 'Student-led Project' ran across the entire lifecycle of Evidence for Enhancement, covering a different theme/topic each academic year. This annual focus on a new theme or project ensured that student representatives felt a sense of ownership for each project that fell under the umbrella of the Student-led Project. The project was led by a Steering Group, chaired by the Student Theme lead, whose membership included representation from students' association/union officers, staff employed in student engagement roles, and representatives from student-focused sector organisations. The membership of the Steering Group was amended on an annual basis to reflect the year-long tenure of most student representatives.

In the first year of the Theme, the Student-led Project undertook work on 'Responding to Student Voice'. The project consulted the sector, undertook an institutional and sector-wide survey, organised a 'think-tank event' and commissioned a review of international practice to explore and develop principles for responding to the student voice and 'closing the feedback loop'. The final output of the Responding to Student Voice project was the publication of the 'Responding to the Student Voice: Principles of Practice' cards, which showcased a series of inter-related principles of practice, developed from the information gathered as part of the consultation, think-tank event and scan of international practice. An editable version of the cards, an introductory sheet, a planning sheet, and an informational poster were also published, and subsequently a guide about using the cards to support online activity was produced as campuses were closed due to the pandemic. QAA Scotland undertook a significant exercise in raising sector colleagues' awareness of the Principles of Practice, presenting at eight sector-wide meetings and conferences.

Institutions and students' associations have used the cards with staff and students in workshops, training sessions and meetings. For example, Scotland's Rural College used the cards in the 'New to Teaching at SRUC' workshop, and found the cards were useful as a tool to highlight the principles of responding to student feedback to new teaching staff and to students from the outset (Scotland's Rural College Year 3 report). The cards were used by the Liverpool Guild of Students as part of their training for University staff on the current student representative system, and they fed back that the cards were used to encourage staff to critically reflect on how they are currently responding to student feedback and ways that they can improve. Edinburgh Napier University used the Principles of Practice cards as

part of a two-day workshop with Sri Lankan colleagues to share the Scottish approach to quality enhancement. The cards were used to provoke reflection on existing practices and encourage discussion about the diversity of student engagement approaches and possibilities. They reported that, 'The conversations triggered by using the cards as prompts were rich and hugely thought provoking' (Edinburgh Napier University Online focus group). Several students' associations/unions used the cards to help improve the student representation system, and the way in which staff and students interact and respond to feedback, resulting in changes in policies and processes.

The Responding to Student Voice project promoted principles of practice that could be reflected on within each institutional context and developed a resource that was practical and could be flexibly used. This project successfully generated awareness of and engagement with the resource, while also stimulating reflections on and changes to policies and practices within institutions.

In the second year of the Theme, the Student-led Project explored the role of data and evidence in the work of student representatives. The work produced the student *Guide to Using Evidence in Higher Education*, and a subsequent staff Guide, which are reported on in section 4.2.3.

The Student-led Project, as an overarching project, serves as a new model for student engagement in Theme work and its impact.

6.2.3   Student participation in institutional projects

In addition to this sector-level project, quite a few institutions allocated small pots of funding to encourage and facilitate staff and students working collaboratively. Some of the small pots of funding were aimed at explicitly ensuring student participation in the projects, particularly in leadership roles. For example, at Edinburgh Napier University, 'the criteria for funding of these [mini projects] was that students were active contributors to this work to foster positive student engagement', and one project was led by the Students' Association (Edinburgh Napier University Year 3 report). Similarly, Heriot-Watt University reported good engagement in projects by students:

> *Our Theme funded projects have seen a significant rise in the number of projects working with students as part of the project team. Indeed, one project was led and managed entirely by students. Over the 3 years of the Theme, 33 staff were directly involved in the design and running of a funded project, while 28 students were involved as research assistants. Many more students were involved as participants in these projects.*
> (Heriot-Watt University Year 3 report)

Several institutional student-led projects focused on the provision of data to students and student representatives, and developing data capacity. This is an important element to the Theme work, as it contributes to transparency and developing the capacity of students and student representatives to use data to inform personal decision-making, and also to input into discussions and policy-making within the institution. For example, the Student Association at SRUC used the student *Guide to Using Evidence in Higher Education* to undertake analysis of some student voice work. The Guide enabled a more thematic analysis which resulted in more explicit recommendations to SRUC. Consequently, the academic leadership team commissioned further research from the Student Association during the coronavirus pandemic, allowing greater student voice into decision-making.

The University of Edinburgh had projects exploring the data provided to sabbatical officers during their induction and the provision of school-level data to student representatives to

help them perform their role (University of Edinburgh In-depth report). This project concluded that providing accessible data to students must be complemented by appropriate training and guidance on the use of data.

The Open University in Scotland (OUiS) offers an interesting example of a student-led project, targeted at the whole institution. In November 2019, student representatives, in partnership with OUiS and the wider Open University, planned and delivered a full-day event on Learning Analytics for the student community. The day focused on analytics and how the OUiS uses data to support learning. The student representatives worked in partnership with staff to plan, facilitate and report on the event. Student voice activities, following the event, communicated the event findings with students, including the production of student and staff-facing reports on the event. The student-led event enabled students to engage in a tangible way with the Theme, which can be challenging for a distance learning institution, and the student-facing report promoted the work to a wider student audience (Open University in Scotland Year 3 report and TLG meeting).

Institutional student-led projects empower students to engage with, and own, Enhancement Theme-related work. In addition, they can prove to be useful and engaging opportunities for staff and students to work collaboratively on emerging issues relating to both communities. Explicitly stating that institutional projects must have active student contributors to receive funding is one approach to ensuring student engagement and co-creation of all institutional Theme work.

6.3   Sector-wide collaboration

Through many aspects of the Theme the sector has worked together to share experiences and develop a better understanding of capacity in, and resources for, the effective use of data to enhance the student experience. The purpose of this section is not to assess the contribution of collaborative clusters to achieving impact within the Evidence for Enhancement Theme, as this has been done throughout the report, but to draw attention to the value of providing opportunities for sector-wide collaboration in future Themes.

The cluster work offers an important opportunity for staff and students to work with colleagues from other institutions. For example, the University of Stirling wrote:

> *The work of the clusters around developing programme leaders; learning analytics; employability data have all proved extremely useful in creating space for discussion on these important topics and have allowed us to join forces with other universities to collect more impactful evidence for change.*
> (University of Stirling Year 3 report)

Certainly, the collaborative clusters proved popular during the Enhancement Theme, with all institutions participating in at least one cluster. Data from the Enhancing Programme Leadership cluster in 2018-19 found that 65 separate individuals attended the four roundtable events held during this year (Cluster Summary report). One hundred and forty seven people attended workshops organised by the Intangibles cluster (Cluster Summary report). Approximately 300 people have participated in the graduate support MOOC (Cluster Summary report). It should also be noted that several institutional reports noted that they had hoped and intended to participate in more clusters, but a lack of time had made this not possible.

The evaluation of the impact of collaborative clusters on creating an evidence-informed culture and enhancing the student experience is less clear, although evidence from the sector's response to the COVID-19 pandemic suggests a positive impact has been achieved (see section 4.1.6). Indeed, the impact may be seen beyond the life of this Enhancement

Theme. Heriot-Watt University, for example, plans to build on its engagement in collaborative clusters in the next Enhancement Theme.

> *The collaborative clusters are a useful innovation that has elevated connections across institutions and the status and engagement with the Theme in HWU. In particular, within HWU we intend to build upon the work of the Student Wellbeing Cluster through continuing the work we have started during this Theme into the next Theme. We will also be continuing the work we have undertaken around programme leadership as part of the Resilient Learning Communities Theme.*
> (Heriot-Watt University Year 3 report)

Collaborative clusters have certainly made a significant contribution to the organisation and operation of the Enhancement Themes, providing opportunities to discuss and learn from colleagues, and broadening engagement with the Theme activity. For example, roundtable discussions held as part of the Enhancing Programme Leadership cluster were particularly valuable for sharing practice about the experience of being programme leader in other institutions. Participants reported the gaining of new knowledge in some key areas relating to the experience of programme leaders at other institutions, including the huge diversity in the role, alternative ways of approaching the role, and that the lack of preparation for and recognition of the role is universal. All respondents reported that they were now more aware of the scholarship around programme leadership as a direct result of their involvement with the cluster. Many attendees noted that the discussion had helped them reflect on the induction of new programme leaders, the provision of coherent support and guidance to support them in their role, and the setting of achievable goals for programme teams. It was also noted that this collaborative cluster opened up engagement with the Enhancement Themes to a group of staff that do not always get the opportunity to participate in external learning and teaching events and networks, and 'the appetite for this is significant', but it can be difficult to bring people together in-person due to time constraints (Enhancing Programme Leadership Summary report). The report concluded:

> *The collaborative cluster model has worked exceptionally well for this particular area of work, facilitating staff from across the Scottish sector and beyond to come together to explore an emerging area of focus.*
> (Cluster Summary report)

The Creative Disciplines and the Intangibles collaborative clusters and the institutional work undertaken at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (discussing what makes a good teacher and a good learner) suggest a certain unease among some teams with the use of data and evidence for enhancement, as well as a reliance on traditional metrics (to assess the quality of the student experience). All of these projects provided a collaborative space for participants to meet and engage with the Theme in a way that was relevant to them. For example, Glasgow School of Art utilised the Creative Disciplines collaborative cluster toolkit to help build greater confidence among staff and students to create enriched impact statements regarding the value of a creative practices education at the School.

The collaborative clusters have provided a valuable way for colleagues across the sector to meet to discuss emerging issues related to Evidence for Enhancement. The introduction of collaborative clusters to the Enhancement Theme has been received positively across the sector. However, QAA Scotland and individual institutions need to ensure that institutions do not spread themselves too thinly across the cluster work. Future guidance on collaborative cluster engagement might set out a generalised idea for the number of clusters it is feasible for institutions to run or contribute to productively. The longer-term impact of these clusters must continue to be considered, as we move into future Themes.

What is less clear is how these interactions and learning have translated into practice and impact within institutions, but this is something that could well occur beyond the life of the Evidence for Enhancement Theme, and could be explored in future Enhancement Themes. There are also questions about how many clusters it is feasible for institutions to participate in.

6.4   Evaluation

The evaluation of impact was embedded into the Evidence for Enhancement Theme, which was particularly important because of the Theme's focus on the use of evidence. Findings from these evaluation activities have contributed to both improving interventions and creating an evidence base of effective practice for dissemination. While future Themes may not focus explicitly on the use of evidence, evaluation of Theme activity will continue to be useful and relevant for the operation of future Enhancement Themes.

Institutions have responded positively to the evaluation process, finding the targeted evaluative activity to be manageable. Reflecting on the intermediate and long-term impact of work within a structured framework, supported by dedicated guidance and templates, has helped institutions to gain a better understanding of the impact (or potential future impact) of their Theme activity. For example, Abertay University stated:

> *Our key learning points from the Theme evaluation work were on working out at the beginning what we thought the short-term, medium-term and long-term benefits were and how we could measure them. This meant that we would have the necessary measures in place… It has also been useful to distinguish between light-touch and in-depth evaluation and to consider that not all work needs to be formally evaluated. The templates for the evaluation work have provided useful prompts to think about our work.*
> (Abertay University Year 3 report)

The Open University in Scotland also reflected positively on the approach taken to evaluation, including the provision of webinars and evaluation templates.

> *The evaluation materials have been invaluable in facilitating and guiding our evaluation work. The templates have allowed us to reflect on aspects of projects we may not have otherwise considered, and allowed for both in-depth and light-touch evaluations to present a full and rounded report of the projects. The evaluations facilitated consideration of unexpected outcomes, which gave us the opportunity to report on how the projects evolved over the 3 years, and when this question was posed to project leaders provided a thought-provoking evaluation of our projects.*
> (Open University in Scotland Year 3 report)

This Theme has focused on developing the capacity of project leaders to plan activities and interventions to make an impact. The theory of change evaluation approach facilitates this way of working by encouraging 'thinking through' and making explicit how change is expected to happen, and to use this to develop intermediate indicators of success that can demonstrate progress towards longer-term goals; some of these changes may occur beyond the project timeframe. The approach also provides feedback on the extent to which the expected progress is being made, and can identify changes that need to be made to improve effectiveness. This approach was helpful when things did not work as planned:

> *It was reassuring to be able to contact Professor Liz Thomas with any question. We found her guidance particularly useful for the projects which did not go according to plan. She suggested reflecting on what hadn't worked and revising timelines with indicators and milestones for the in-depth evaluation of the SIMD20 project.*
> (Open University in Scotland Year 3 report)

The evaluation has had a formative effect; it encouraged teams to learn from their activities and revise them to increase the likelihood of success. The formative value of the evaluation model is demonstrated through an example from the University of Stirling. It introduced Stirling Essentials, an online module for undergraduate and postgraduate students to access prior to commencing at Stirling, and to refer to throughout their studies. The take-up was excellent, with very large numbers and proportions of students visiting the site after the launch. The student survey following the initial launch period found that 65% of undergraduates surveyed and 54% of postgraduates had accessed the site. 74% of undergraduates and 83% of postgraduates thought it was informative but only 30-40% felt it gave them confidence or made them feel less anxious about arriving at Stirling. This feedback was explored through focus groups, which indicated there was too much information to digest, and that it should be easier to navigate and issued earlier. While being mindful that Stirling Essentials is one element of an induction package of measures to help build confidence, the feedback has been used to review the content and layout of the material, and reconsider communications around the module to improve its impact on student confidence.

Embedding evaluation into the Enhancement Theme process is crucial, and evaluation should be integrated into future Enhancement Theme work. Indeed, institutions are embedding this planning and evaluation approach into future work within the Themes and more broadly. Abertay University plan to use some of these approaches to evaluate the implementation and impact of its new Learning Enhancement Strategy. Similarly, Edinburgh Napier University is building thinking about evaluation and evidence into its planning for the next Theme:

> *One reflection on this approach has been on the importance of factoring in evaluation plans from the outset. As we are planning for the next Enhancement Theme, it is already apparent that greater consideration of evidence for evaluation is influencing the Institutional Team's thinking.*
> (Edinburgh Napier University Year 3 report)

The more critical feedback about the evaluation approach is that it was not introduced at the beginning of the Theme, but also that it is time-consuming, despite a decision not to evaluate everything and to utilise existing evidence.

> *We made the decision at the beginning of Year 3 not to take on any new project but to focus on completion, reporting and evaluation of ongoing projects. We have used this time to reflect on the outcomes of the various projects and how the Theme fits into the wider work of the team. This has been effective and as a result we have produced more timely, thoughtful and comprehensive evaluations than we may otherwise have done.*
> (Focus group with institutional Theme Leaders)

A further observation is that larger projects have not achieved their impact within the three-year Enhancement Theme timeline, and so evaluation needs to take place after the end of the Theme. Given the length of the larger sector-level projects, some lasting the entirety of a Theme, it has not been possible to evaluate the impact, specifically the long-term impact, of these projects within the lifetime of the Evidence for Enhancement Theme.

Evaluation of the continuing impact of sector-level projects must be continued outwith the lifetime of a Theme to gain a complete understanding of the impact of this work. However, it is still clear, through the evidence and evaluation of intermediate outcomes, that the Evidence for Enhancement Theme has had a positive impact upon the student experience across the Scottish higher education sector.

7 Conclusions, implications and recommendations

7.1 Conclusions

Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience has successfully contributed to a more evidence-informed culture in higher education in Scotland, and there are strong indications that this will continue to impact positively on the student experience beyond the life of this particular Theme. This report provides a synthesis of the evidence of impact, and demonstrates how the Enhancement Theme has operated and the activities that have contributed to creating this positive impact. A number of conclusions can be drawn:

- change takes time, and not all change happens and can be evaluated within the project time period
- within this three-year Enhancement Theme there is strong evidence of a more evidence-informed culture within the Scottish higher education sector that is contributing, and will continue to contribute, to the enhancement of the student experience
- an impact pathway is a useful way of mapping out the changes that have occurred and the changes expected in the future, and to understand how change happens
- the processes that worked together within this Theme to bring about evidence-informed enhancements to the student experience are complex. This complexity is challenging to entirely capture and convey in a logic chain, but rather, this tool has proved valuable in providing a useful starting point to conceptualise change
- the contribution of collaboration to the effectiveness of this Theme should be recognised, particularly joint problem-solving with others which developed capacity and created networks that can be utilised in further enhancement work
- resources need to be supported by more effective approaches to engage intended audiences
- student involvement has been facilitated by continuing equal representation in the TLG, and the student-led sector-level projects Responding to Student Voice and Students Using Evidence. However, other institutional strategies are also required to increase the number of students involved in and benefiting from participating in the Enhancement Theme work
- evaluation should be built into Theme work from the beginning, and sufficient time and resource should be allocated to this. Having a common evaluation framework has been useful, and could be extended further
- the evaluation has generated insights into institutional organisational factors, particularly the value of aligning Theme activity with institutional priorities, which seems to point towards the need for a small central team, utilising existing organisational structures to engage a wider group of staff and students
- Theme funding can be used in a range of ways to add value to institutional work, and HEIs should review the approaches from other institutions to see what best meets their needs.

7.2 Implications

The evaluation work demonstrates the value of the Enhancement Themes in general, and the Evidence for Enhancement Theme in particular. The evidence strongly suggests that the investment of time and money in this way of working is effective: a more evidence-informed culture has been achieved, and there is evidence from the impact pathway that this will, in turn, result in enhancements to the student experience. This implies that QAA Scotland should continue with this approach to enhancement, and that other countries could learn from and implement a similar programme. Gaining further understanding of the processes and organisational factors that delivered the impact provides guidance for future

Enhancement Themes, and for other nations considering developing a similar model to improve the quality of the student experience in higher education.

7.3 Recommendations

7.3.1 Recommendations for higher education institutions to improve the use of data and evidence to enhance the student experience

1   Make data and evidence accessible to different groups within the HEI, using a range of ways to present and access information.
2   Embed awareness raising, training and dissemination of evidence into meetings and networks to develop the capacity of staff and students to access, collect and use data and evidence.
3   Review and revise mechanisms for collecting and utilising data and evidence, especially feedback from students via surveys to improve the quality of data and evidence available.
4   Promote collaboration within the HEI and beyond to improve data processes.
5   Allow sufficient time to achieve longer-term impact, as many activities require staff to make changes that will subsequently enhance the student experience, and build this into planning and reporting structures.

7.3.2 Recommendations for HEIs participating in future Enhancement Themes

1   HEIs should prioritise participation in the Enhancement Themes, as they have the potential to make substantial and sustained changes to the institutional culture and the student experience.
2   Institutional activities, including participation in collaborative clusters, should be aligned with institutional priorities to both facilitate the work and to maximise the impact.
3   Institutional activities should be planned to include some 'quick wins', some that will achieve impact during the life of the Enhancement Theme, and some that will take longer to achieve their impact. Early successes will encourage staff and students to participate, but more substantial change takes longer to achieve.
4   Existing institutional structures and processes should be used to both coordinate the work and engage with the wider staff body and student groups.
5   Student involvement should be increased by a mixture of mechanisms, including working with Student Association/Union staff as well as elected representatives, employing students as researchers and project staff and organising student-led events.
6   Evaluation should be built into the work from the beginning to inform planning and the collection of evidence.

7.3.3 Recommendations for Quality Assurance Agency Scotland (QAAS)

1   Continue funding and supporting the Enhancement Theme approach, as it can deliver significant institutional changes to improve the student experience, and represents excellent value for money.
2   Review sector-level activities (resource and guidance production) designing more effective engagement strategies to improve uptake and impact.
3   Encourage HEIs to continue to take a more strategic approach to activities, by aligning them to institutional priorities and designing them to make an impact during and beyond the lifetime of the Theme.
4   Embed evaluation processes and capacity building into the work from the beginning of each Theme.

5   Encourage institutions to consider carefully the number of clusters to which they contribute to ensure that cluster topics are translated into action and impact.

6   Consider introducing a year between Themes, to allow evaluation of impact that occurs after the end of the Theme, and to promote improved planning of activities for the new Theme, for example exploring with partner bodies how they might contribute to Theme activities (see section 7.3.4)

7   Consider greater collaboration with other sector-wide bodies, including the Scottish Funding Council, Advance HE and sparqs, plus other organisations in the higher education sector, and beyond, that are relevant to specific Themes.

8   Consider engaging with other countries that have a similar enhancement approach to promote mutual learning and development.

7.3.4   Recommendations for sector-wide bodies in Scotland

1   Enhancement Themes are an effective and cost-efficient way of facilitating change in the sector. Consider both signposting HEIs to the work of the Enhancement Themes and exploring alignment of sector-body activity with the Themes. This may include contributing resources and expertise, utilising resources and expertise generated by the Theme, and initiating activities to encourage further engagement with the Theme by sector bodies' target audience(s).

7.3.5   Recommendations for higher education sectors/organisations beyond Scotland

1   Consider introducing an Enhancement Theme approach to engage HEIs and improve the student experience, based on collaboration within and between HEIs and other organisations to increase understanding, develop capacity and plan, implement and evaluate change to enhance the student experience. A collaborative, thematic approach operating at different levels within HEIs and the higher education sector has been proven to have widespread and long-lasting impact.

2   Implementation of an Enhancement Theme approach needs to be sufficiently flexible to be relevant to every HEI, and to different staff and student groups within institutions.

3   Implementation of an Enhancement Theme approach can be informed by the recommendations made in this report for institutions, QAAS and sector-wide bodies in Scotland (see section 7.3.1)

4   Build evaluation in from the beginning and throughout the process, and develop the capacity of HEIs, their staff and students to undertake and learn from their evaluation process.

Appendix 1: Evaluation priorities

This was preparatory work for the first evaluation workshop.

Before the workshop, it would be appreciated if you could do some preliminary work and ensure all team members participating in the workshop have a copy of Table 1 with them.

Complete the first three columns of Table 1 (see overpage).

1   List all the key activities or projects your institution is undertaking as part of the Evidence for Enhancement Theme this year, 2018-19, (use your institutional plan to inform this activity).
2   Indicate the scale of each project; large projects are those that are taking place across the institution, involving significant staff/student time or financial investment; smaller projects operate locally, involving one or two staff and students with little or no project funding.
3   Categorise each project into one of three evaluation categories: in-depth evaluation, light-touch evaluation; no evaluation. Smaller projects should be light-touch or no evaluation; large projects can be categorised in any category; you should have at least one, but no more than three projects identified for in-depth evaluation each year. (Priorities may be continued into 2019-20, or new priorities may be selected.)

Table 1: Overview of projects and level of evaluation

Please expand or contract this table as necessary.

Name of Institution:

Title of key activity or project	**Scale**: Large (cross-institution) or smaller (local)	**Evaluation level** for 2018-19 (in-depth, light-touch, none)
Project 1:		
Project 2:		
Project 3:		

Appendix 2: Evaluation template for smaller projects

Overview

The purpose of this document is to support the collection of evidence of impact for smaller projects, which may operate in one part of the institution, e.g. through a funded project, as a result of a larger intervention or following the identification and sharing of practice. It offers a light-touch approach to evaluation by providing a semi-structured way to support respondents to provide useful information, but it can be used flexibly.

Template

Please provide as much of the following information as possible. For further guidance please contact Liz Thomas liz@lizthomasassociates.co.uk or your TLG member.

Title of your project

A descriptive title is useful.

Description of project

Please state what your project aims to achieve and how. Approximately 150 words.

Categorisation

Please indicate how you would categorise your project: (You can tick as many boxes as required)

☐   Collection of additional data or evidence

☐   Improving the use of data or evidence

☐   By staff

☐   By students

Specific activities undertaken

Please list the activities undertaken.

Summary of student involvement

Please say how students have been involved in the design and delivery of your project, if relevant.

Changes made

Please describe changes made to policies, processes and practices as part of, or a result of, your project? Who is affected (individual, course, faculty, institution, etc)?

Short-term benefits and medium-term outcomes

Please describe how staff or students have benefited from project in the short and medium terms. Short-term refers to immediately after activities have been delivered; medium-term is approximately a year. Please explain how you know this, including formal evaluation evidence and informal knowledge.

Longer-term impact

Longer-term may be beyond the life of the project.

How do you think your project has or will improve the student experience?

How has or will your project contribute to creating or improving an institutional culture that collects and utilises evidence?

What other longer-term impacts have you seen or do you anticipate?

Please explain how you know this, including formal evaluation evidence and informal knowledge.

Other benefits or outcomes

Are there any unintended benefits or outcomes?

Are there other positive outcomes (or negative consequences) not captured elsewhere in the form?

Please explain how you know this, including formal evaluation evidence and informal knowledge.

Your details

Name
Department or equivalent
Institution
Email

How your data will be used

The information provided here will be used to inform the overall evaluation of the Evidence for Enhancement Theme. Your personal details will be kept securely and not shared; we may use your email to clarify information provided in this form. We may include your name and institution as part of the outputs of the Enhancement Theme. Please tick here to indicate that you consent to the use of your details in this way.

☐ I consent to being contacted to clarify information provided in this form

☐ I consent to my name and institution being used in outputs of the Evidence for Enhancement theme.

Please return this form to Liz Thomas Associates Ltd by email as a Word attachment.

liz@lizthomasassociates.co.uk

Appendix 3: Developing an in-depth evaluation plan

These activities were undertaken during a workshop, with the goal of completing the table at the end of the document as a summary evaluation plan. The completed evaluation plans were reviewed, individual feedback provided, and a further workshop organised, providing guidance in relation to common challenges and exemplars of good practice.

1) Title and brief description of one project selected for in-depth evaluation:

_____

_____

_____

2) List the key tasks to be undertaken as part of this project:

_____

_____

_____

3) In summary, this project: (You can tick as many boxes as appropriate)

Collects new evidence   ☐

Improves the use of evidence by staff   ☐

Improves the use of evidence by staff   ☐

4) In the longer-term this project is expected to: (You can tick both boxes)

Improve the student experience   ☐

Contribute to a culture in which evidence is utilised   ☐

List any other expected longer-term impacts

_____

5) In your own words describe the logical relationship, or the links between your project activities or key tasks and your longer-term impact goals. Think carefully about the steps in between; the diagram below may help this process.

Figure 1: Logic chain informing the impact evaluation of Evidence for Enhancement

For example:

The project will create a data dashboard which provides staff with easier access to institutional data that will be stored in one place and presented in an accessible format. If the data is in one place and easier to access, then staff will have greater awareness of the data available, and then they will be more likely to use it. If they use the data it can inform decisions about teaching and support, making these more relevant or student-centred. If teaching and support are more student-centred then students will attend and engage more, and then their satisfaction will improve. If staff see the value of utilising data and it is readily available, then they are more likely to make use of additional data and evidence in the future.

This project is developing alternative ways to collect the student voice. If the ways of collecting student voice are more effective then more student views will be heard. If more student voices are available then staff can use this evidence to improve the design and delivery of curriculum or services; and then this will improve the student experience.

6) Identify some potential short-term benefits, medium-term outcomes and longer-term impacts, including indicators and evidence sources for this project. (See handout for some suggestions and ideas.)

In the short term, i.e. immediately after the delivery of the project or initial tasks, we would expect the following benefits:

(i)

(ii)

(iii)

In the medium term, i.e. during the year after the project has started, we would expect the following changes or outcomes:

(i)

(ii)

(iii)

In the longer term, which may be beyond the project time-frame, we would expect to see the following changes or impact:

(i)

(ii)

(iii)

What types of evidence could you use to demonstrate that some of these changes have occurred? Think about evidence which already exists (e.g. processes that create documents etc) rather than collecting new evidence; also consider the role of feedback from staff and other forms of qualitative evidence; can this be collected through existing mechanisms such as meetings etc? If you use existing evidence sources this will enable you to generate a baseline, which demonstrates what the situation was like before the project and so allows you to compare and indicate progress.

Overview of impact evaluation for in-depth evaluation priorities

Please expand or contract this table as necessary to provide details about each of your in-depth evaluation priorities.

Project title			
Description of key activities or changes			
Impact narrative			
Short-term indicators, evidence and baseline (Y/N)			
Medium-term indicators, evidence and baseline (Y/N)			
Longer-term indicators, evidence and baseline (Y/N)			

Appendix 4: Example of a completed evaluation template

Evidence for Enhancement: Impact evaluation

Name of Institution: Robert Gordon University

Logic chain and theory of change
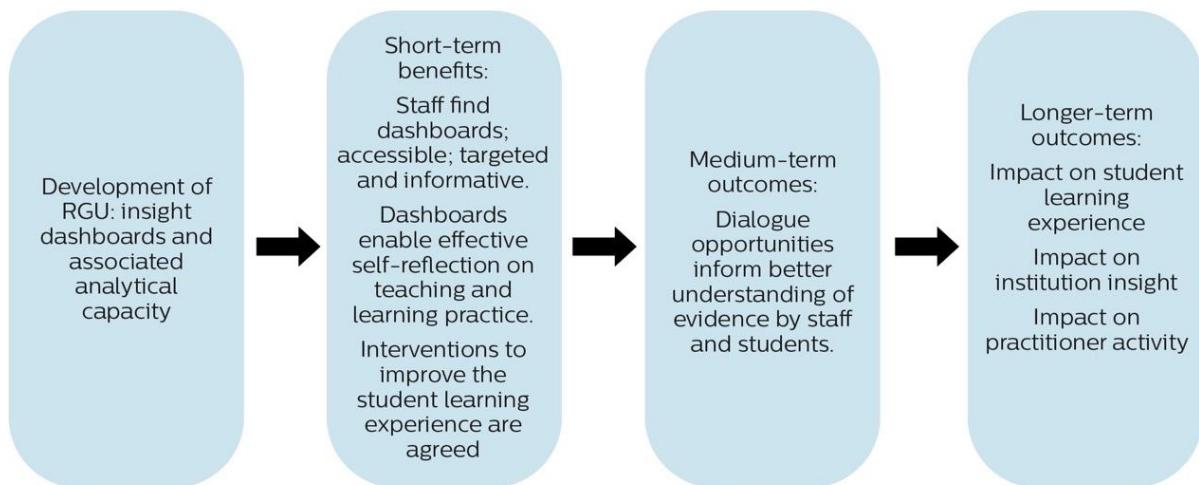
Table 2: Overview of impact evaluation for in-depth evaluation priorities

Project title	Optimising evidence: Further development of our analytical capacity through the phased roll-out of a new business intelligence reporting tool
Description of key activities or changes	The outputs of this project will be a suite of new business intelligence dashboards to better support core quality assurance and enhancement processes. The University has a long-standing commitment to the strategic use of evidence to support quality assurance processes, and to drive enhancement activity. In recent years this has been formally recognised by the positive outcomes of our *Enhancement-led Institutional Review* (2016), and Gold Award achieved via the *Teaching Excellence Framework* (2017). The strategic development and roll-out of RGU:Insight will reinforce and strengthen the firm institutional commitment to the ethos of evidence-based enhancement. *'Our strategy map'* articulates a clear commitment to '*ensuring a high quality student experience*'. The strategic ambition will be supported by a number of associated developments - within the context of the Enhancement Theme project these include substantial investment in a new business intelligence reporting tool and the establishment of new functional areas to develop analytical capacity: - *Strategy, Planning and Policy Development* - will lead the coordinated implementation of new software

	- *Analytics and Student Partnership Team* - undertake integrated analysis of key metrics, with a focus on the increasing the reach and impact of student feedback - *Step-change Team* - retain oversight of institutional learning and teaching projects. Working in partnership with colleagues across the University these functions aim to deliver measurable enhancement to learners' experiences and will ensure there is a focus on achieving project outcomes and targets. This project will: • Bring together expertise from different parts of the institution • Facilitate deeper analysis of existing evidence sources, and give consideration to augmenting these existing sources as appropriate • Create 'new' sources of evidence • Contribute to the further development of analytical capability institutionally, and, amongst practitioners In the longer term this project will: • Contribute to a culture in which evidence is utilised effectively to inform enhancement activity; and • Demonstrate improvements to the student learning experience, as evidenced by KPIs. Activity will include: • Scoping of technical specifications, data definitions and data governance in support of the implementation. • Creation of innovative reporting functionality to underpin key business functions, such as our Annual Course Appraisal Process. • Revision of Annual Course Appraisal process and pro forma to align with new presentation of data. • Development of RGU's capacity to deliver high quality analytical insights which aim to inform effective, timely and sustainable enhancement activity within teaching and learning and service delivery. • Development of support for end-users, supported by key developers. • Creation of dialogue opportunities to discuss key insights from the evidence sources. This co-ordinated approach will help ensure a common understanding of the capabilities of the dashboards and reliability of data.
Impact narrative	• The project will facilitate cross-institutional working to design and deliver data dashboards which provide staff with single source to institutional data. • Evidence being available from 'one' source will enable easier access and increase the opportunity for effective self-reflection, analysis. • Academic Staff will spend less time retrieving evidence from disparate sources. • Academic staff will be empowered to interrogate the dashboards and to identify evidence-based enhancements. • Usage of dashboards will increase over time.

|	
	- Dialogue on the evidence therein will inform decision-making and effective interventions.
	- Clear evidence of effective self-reflection within Annual Course Appraisal Pro formas
	- There will be clear impact of progress against agreed Action and Enhancement Plans
	- There will be clear impact on student learning experience, as measured by pre-defined KPIs
	- Progress against actions/enhancements will be effectively monitored in-year.
	- Staff [from Senior managers to practitioners and Student Leaders] will build capacity to target action/enhancement activity.
	- Approaches to evidence for enhancement will become embedded at various levels within the institution.
	- Supporting strategic decisions - Development of process to continue to ensure our evidence-base is meaningful, and provides deep insights into the student experience
	- Understanding and celebrating excellence - Development of process to continue to support the growth of a culture of effective self-evaluation, promoting the analysis of evidence for enhancement purposes.
Short-term indicators, evidence and baseline (Y/N)	Indicators of success in 2017/18 will include: - Initial Annual Appraisal dashboards created and released - Reduction in time spent accessing individual data sources - Establishment of baseline usage statistics of dashboards - by staff - Establishment of baseline attendance at drop-in sessions - Indication of reflection on evidence within Annual Course Appraisal Pro formas - Reference to evidence within Action and Enhancement Plans - Qualitative feedback on dashboards, and associated reflective processes
Medium-term indicators, evidence and baseline (Y/N)	Indicators of success in 2018/19 will include: - Increased usage of initial dashboards - Further capacity building to develop analytical insights into KPIs - Creation of new dashboards to capture additional sources of evidence - Increase on baseline usage statistics of dashboards - by staff - Establishment of baseline engagement with facilitated dialogue opportunities - Review of attendance at drop-in sessions - Increased indication of reflection on evidence within Annual Course Appraisal Pro formas - Increased reference to evidence within Action and Enhancement Plans - Qualitative feedback on dashboards, and associated reflective processes - Increases in performance against targets eg YoY, by project - Exploration of use of RGU:Insight by student leaders - Impact on student learning experience, as measured by pre-defined KPIs

Longer-term indicators, evidence and baseline (Y/N)	Indicators of success for 2019/20 and beyond will include: • Increase of data sources contained within Appraisal dashboard, • Embedded use of dashboards by institution and practitioners • Evidence of engagement with support, and dialogue, opportunities • Evidence of effective self-reflection within Annual Course Appraisal Pro formas • Evidence of progress against agreed 18/19 Action and Enhancement Plans • Evidence of impact on student learning experience, as measured by pre-defined KPIs • Capture of case studies of effective practice • Refinement of process to support effective collation of data and the communication of insight and enable staff as change agents • Development of new dashboards in support of other areas of business (eg student-facing services) Deeper consideration of concept of 'excellence everywhere': • How close are we to consistently delivering 'excellence' across all of our provision? • What more could be done to ensure all our students have consistently positive experiences of teaching and learning?

Appendix 5: Overview of evaluations informing this report

Institution, collaborative cluster, sector	Light touch or in-depth	Title
UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN	ID	Enhancing the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)
		Review of Student Course Evaluation Form and process (SCEF)
	LT	Open badge employer awareness survey
		Creating a good practice culture
		Evaluation of the Postgraduate (Taught) Student Experience
Abertay University	ID	Supporting Heads of Division to use evidence more effectively
	LT	Learning Enhancement conference
		Supporting module leaders to use evidence in reviewing modules
		Supporting programme leaders at an institutional level
University of Dundee	LT	Enhancing Teaching and Learning through the analysis of the Student Led Teaching Awards data
		An evaluation study of the impact of lecture capture on the student experience and academic performance
		The Dundee Longitudinal Integrated Clerkship - a phenomenological exploration of the experiences of medical students
		Making A Drama Out Of It! Improving the student experience through Forum Theatre
THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH	ID	Annual Monitoring Student Data Dashboards
		Handover Documents for Programme Representatives - Local-level Student Representative
		Provision of standard high-level analysis of student feedback to School student representatives
		Student voice mechanisms graphically designed visual representation
	LT	Monitoring engagement with staff-facing resource on closing the student feedback loop and seeking more examples to add
		Supporting staff to make evidence-informed decisions to enhance the student experience: sharing good practice
		Supporting staff to make evidence-informed decisions to enhance the student experience: holding a sector-wide event on the use of qualitative data

Institution, collaborative cluster, sector	Light touch or in-depth	Title
Edinburgh Napier University	ID	The Challenge of Community and Belonging
		Supporting Programme Leaders: Development of the Programme Leader Operational Checklist and Moodle Course
	LT	Graphic Design Reading Room
		Worldwide Napier
		Exploring Language and Culture through Film
		Building an inclusive programme: Scottish ethnic minority law students and understanding barriers to engagement
		Recruit, retain and prosper: A strategy for men in nursing and midwifery at Edinburgh Napier University
GCU Glasgow Caledonian University University for the Common Good	ID	2020 Student Experience Scholarship Scheme
	LT	Contemporary Academic Advising and Mentoring in GCU
		Higher Education English for Academic Purposes at GCU
		Assessing the use of rubrics across GCU
THE GLASGOW SCHOOL OF ART	ID	Enhancing the Programme Monitoring and Annual Reporting (PMAR) to facilitate improved engagement with metric data
	LT	Using the Creative Disciplines Collaborative Cluster Toolkit for Impact to explore what disciplines value: implications for School of Design
University of Glasgow	LT	Student Engagement Early Warning System
		Annual Monitoring
HERIOT WATT UNIVERSITY	ID	Evaluation of the Revitalising the Student Survey Process at Heriot-Watt University
	LT	Closing the feedback loop in computer science labs using GitLab for mechanised and human code review
		Adapting the 'New Normal': Developing PALS Virtual Learning to Enhance Student Retention
		A Collaborative and Co-creative Project with Students: Improving the Learning Experiences of Chinese Students in MACS
		Improving Retention: Understanding the challenges for students with disabilities
		Expectations and Experiences of First Year Languages Students in their Transition from Secondary to Higher Education
		Retention amongst Malaysia Foundation Programme (MFP) students: An exploratory study

Institution, collaborative cluster, sector	Light touch or in-depth	Title
University of the Highlands and Islands Oilthigh na Gàidhealtachd agus nan Eilean	ID	Region-wide surveys
		Student feedback data
	LT	Assessment and feedback symposium (event)
		Increasing student engagement with surveys (project)
		Student rep summit (event)
		Increasing sense of community and belonging for online and distance learning (ODL) student
		Student Voice in Partnership
The Open University	ID	Supporting students from deprived backgrounds: closing the attainment gap
	LT	Changing Study Intentions: test and learn pilot
		Fika
		Remote pair programming
Queen Margaret University EDINBURGH	ID	Five Things (module data visualisation for the staff dashboard)
	LT	Improving use of Module Evaluation information
ROBERT GORDON UNIVERSITY ABERDEEN	ID	Further development of our analytical capacity through the phased roll-out of a new business intelligence reporting tool
		Understanding the Graduate Apprentice student experience
	LT	Student Engagement: Extension of the reach and impact of the suite of internal student evaluation questionnaires
		Support for the implementation of our new Employability Hub, and graduate-level employability aspirations
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland	LT	Good Teacher/Good Learner

Institution, collaborative cluster, sector	Light touch or in-depth	Title
SRUC	LT	Digitally and Collaboratively Enhance Students within a Digital Classroom
		Development of a range of electronic resources, which aid student learning and understanding of the college farm environment
		Enhancing Practice through Staff Development
		The Piloting of a Mid Module Evaluation Survey at SRU
		Enhancing Data Use in Annual Monitoring and Review (AMR) at SRU
University of St Andrews	ID	Enhancing Attainment and Building Diversity across the Student Demographic
		Using evidence to improve the design of learning and teaching space
	LT	Using nomination data from Student-Led Teaching Awards to identify and share good practice
		Reflection on the nature and use of evidence to enhance the student experience
University of Stirling	ID	Introduction of Stirling Essentials: an on-line module for students commencing studies at University of Stirling to help orientate students; set expectations and provide support on developing academic skills
	LT	The experience of Psychology students on the student led elective, compared to staff led electives
		Open Badge Employer Awareness Survey
		Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Learning and Teaching Content in the Division of History and Politics
		Graduate Destinations widget and information
		Student Employability Dashboard
University of Strathclyde Glasgow	ID	The Strathclyde Learner Experience Framework (LEF)
		Supporting Programme Leaders to Use Data Effectively

Institution, collaborative cluster, sector	Light touch or in-depth	Title
Collaborative cluster	ID	Beyond the metrics: charting the intangible aspects of enhancement in the age of accountability
		Developing Graduate Employability Support in Scotland
	LT	Developing a toolkit for tutors to promote a sense of belonging for online, distance and rural learners at the module and programme level
		Supporting Sense of Belonging for Online and Distance Learners: building resources
		Development of a Learning Analytics Framework Wiki
		Learning Analytics: Student Engagement (Collaborative Cluster)
Sector level	ID	Student and staff guides to using evidence in higher education
		Upskilling webinar series
		Student voice cards
Sector level - planners		HE Data Landscape resource
		In-depth analysis of the Scottish sector National Student Survey performance
Sector level	LT	Progression and retention data in Scottish HEIs annual monitoring processes
		Improving retention and progression - the use of data and evidence
		Learning Analytics Discussion Papers