



enhancement  
themes

# Overview of the Enhancement Themes



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## Background

The Enhancement Themes aim to enhance the student learning experience in Scottish higher education. They do this through identifying specific areas (Themes) for development, and providing time and space for the sector to carry out this development. The Themes encourage staff and students to share current good practice, to generate ideas and models for innovation in learning and teaching, and to learn from useful examples of work from across the globe.

Enhancement Themes are part of the unique Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), which has been designed to support higher education institutions in managing the quality of the student learning experience and to provide public confidence in the quality and standards of higher education. It was developed in 2003 and is coordinated by the Universities Quality Working Group, which has members from the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Universities Scotland, QAA Scotland, the Higher Education Academy, and the National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland.

The QEF consists of five interrelated aspects:

- **a comprehensive programme of institution-led reviews**, carried out by higher education institutions with guidance from the SFC
- **Enhancement-led Institutional Review**: external peer reviews run by QAA Scotland that involve all Scottish higher education institutions over a four-year cycle
- **improved forms of public information about quality**, based on addressing the different needs of a range of stakeholders, including students and employers
- **a greater voice for student representatives**, involving **students in quality management** in higher education. **sparqs** (Student Partnership in Quality Scotland), hosted by NUS Scotland, assists and supports students, students' associations and institutions to improve the effectiveness of student engagement in quality processes, and provides advice to the SFC and institutions on good practice in student engagement
- **a national programme of Enhancement Themes**, managed by QAA Scotland: the programme encourages academic staff, support staff and students to share current good practice and collectively generate ideas and models for innovation in learning and teaching.

This collaborative and integrated approach to quality is unique in many respects: in its balance between quality assurance and enhancement; in the emphasis that it places on the student experience; in its focus on learning and not solely on teaching; and in the spirit of cooperation and partnership that has underpinned all these developments.

Enhancement is conceived of as 'taking deliberate steps to bring about improvement' and the Enhancement Themes programme aims to encourage academic and support staff, and students, to work collectively and actively generate innovation in learning and teaching.

Enhancement Themes celebrated their tenth anniversary in 2013; an online video was produced to summarise the progress made over that time.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 10 years of Enhancement Themes in Scotland: [https://youtu.be/Dqu\\_ZmlLmSo](https://youtu.be/Dqu_ZmlLmSo).

# Student Transitions: the current Enhancement Theme

The current Enhancement Theme is Student Transitions, which will run for three academic years, from summer 2014 to summer 2017. This Theme is an ambitious and comprehensive venture and will focus on transitions into, out of and during university. The Chair of the Theme is Professor Roni Bamber from Queen Margaret University and her Deputy is Lorraine Anderson of the University of Dundee.

Each Institutional Team has provided an institutional plan giving an outline of its intended work on the Theme. Short summaries of each institutional plan can be found on the Enhancement Themes website.<sup>2</sup>

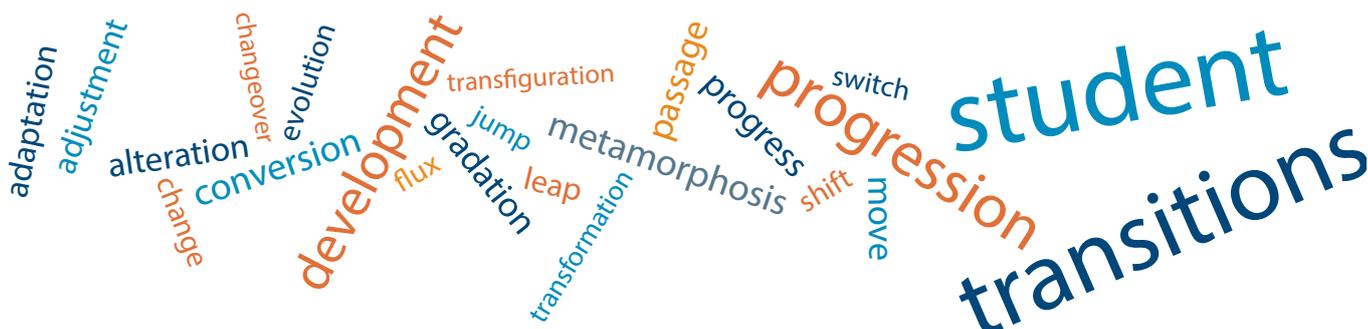
In the institutional plans, 10 key topics around transitions have emerged, which universities will consider as part of their work in the Theme. Many of the topics are being considered by several institutions, which should facilitate joint working and sharing of practice as their work in the Theme develops. The 10 topics are:

- Application and first year
- Change processes
- Colleges and articulation
- Employability and skills
- Honours
- International students and mobility
- Postgraduate
- Scoping
- Technology
- Widening access.

In addition to institutional plans, each Institutional Team was asked to provide examples of existing good practice relating to transitions, which other institutions can learn from. These case studies are also available on the Enhancement Themes website.<sup>3</sup>

It is anticipated that, as the Theme develops, a map of different student transitions will be produced as a means of presenting resources relating to particular transitions.

Work is also being carried out on the skills and strategies that students can be supported to develop, to encourage positive transitions as part of the higher education experience.



<sup>2</sup> Institution plans: [www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/institutional-plans](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/institutional-plans).

<sup>3</sup> Case studies: [www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/institutional-plans/case-studies](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/institutional-plans/case-studies).



Delegates at the 2013 International Enhancement Themes Conference in Glasgow

## Development of the Enhancement Themes

Since 2003, the Enhancement Themes have focused on a variety of aspects of learning and teaching identified by the Scottish higher education sector. The resources from each Theme are published on the Enhancement Themes website, and constitute a large searchable repository of resources, including reports, discussion papers, toolkits, presentations, and videos.<sup>4</sup>

Information about events and ongoing work can also be found on the Enhancement Themes website.

The Themes have undergone substantial evolution since their introduction over a decade ago. In that time they have developed from short one-year projects to longer, three-year undertakings, and their focus has widened more effectively to encompass the diversity of institutional mission and ethos in the Scottish higher education sector. The ways and means by which the Themes have been implemented have evolved too, informed by the findings of external evaluations of the Themes as a component of the QEF. Learning from the experience of each Theme, institutional work has become core, engaging staff and students at the heart of the work.

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<sup>4</sup> Resources: [www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/resources](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/resources).

# Previous Enhancement Themes

To date, nine Enhancement Themes have been completed:

- Assessment (2003-04)
- Responding to Student Needs (2003-04)
- Employability (2004-06)
- Flexible Delivery (2004-06)
- Integrative Assessment (2005-06)
- The First Year: Engagement and Empowerment (2005-08)
- Research-Teaching Linkages: enhancing graduate attributes (2006-08)
- Graduates for the 21st Century: Integrating the Enhancement Themes (2008-11)
- Developing and Supporting the Curriculum (2011-14).

Each previous Theme has its own dedicated webpage within the Enhancement Themes website, with various resources available for download.<sup>5</sup>

The 2013 Scottish parliamentary reception celebrated 10 years of the Enhancement Themes



<sup>5</sup> Completed Enhancement Themes:  
[www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/enhancement-themes/completed-enhancement-themes](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/enhancement-themes/completed-enhancement-themes).

# Examples of outcomes from previous Themes

## Developing and Supporting the Curriculum (DSC) (2011-14)

### Outcomes in curriculum design

This was achieved both through more flexible curriculum structures and through a new focus on embedding the attributes in learning outcomes across programmes. Programme design methods were enhanced and a Flexible Curriculum Toolkit developed.

### Outcomes in curriculum support

New pedagogies underpinning active learning and student engagement were developed and shared across the sector.

### Enhancing the role of students

An increased level of student involvement has emerged, in the DSC Theme itself and in the way many institutions are developing new kinds of partnership arrangements with students. Partnership has been reflected in working with student representatives for the joint development of policy, and in joint attempts to improve aspects of the student experience.

### Support for staff

A snapshot of university teaching was obtained at an important point of transition as the new UK Professional Standards Framework for learning and teaching was introduced. A high degree of commitment to enhancing teaching is reported by institutions and staff.

## Graduates for the 21st Century (G21C): Integrating the Enhancement Themes (2008-11)

### Graduate attributes and qualities

The most prominent outcome of the work of the G21C Theme was a robust and well-articulated collective grasp of the attributes and qualities needed by 21st century graduates. Although each institution's articulation of graduate attributes is distinctively its own, a broad set of common threads was identified.

### Strategies for enhancement

A second major outcome of the G21C Theme was a range of strategies that Scotland's institutions have developed, individually and collaboratively, to advance and embed within institutional practice their enhancement of the student experience.

### Resources, tools and activities

Outputs focused on the core topic of graduate attributes and qualities, but also refreshed and refocused earlier Enhancement Themes: Research-Teaching Linkages, Employability, the First Year, Assessment, and Responding to Student Needs.

## Key recommendations

A number of key recommendations emerged from the G21C Theme, considered in the context of the Developing and Supporting the Curriculum Theme. These included the need to:

- develop ways of integrating, embedding and assessing relevant graduate attributes into a wide range of degree programmes
- develop targeted resources, tools and activities for subject and discipline communities and their subject-specific purposes and practices
- engage students in the process of developing and embedding graduate attributes to make them their own and enhance their ability to articulate them.

## Research-Teaching Linkages: enhancing graduate attributes (2006-08)

The Research-Teaching Linkages Theme produced a number of outputs, including:

- a framing tool for the analysis of research-teaching linkages and development of graduate attributes at institution, faculty/department and course/curriculum level
- an audit tool to gain some understanding of the degree of readiness of an institution in terms of its awareness and capacity to embed research-teaching linkages within curricula
- a sector-wide report covering institutional activities in the development of research-teaching linkages and the achievement of 'research-type' graduate attributes
- a series of disciplinary reports covering research-teaching linkages across the nine discipline areas.

## The First Year: Engagement and Empowerment (2005-08)

The First Year Theme focused on the nature and purposes of the first year in higher education and how students can be engaged and empowered in their learning. Much of the work in this Theme relates to the current Student Transitions Theme, as the support for transitions into and out of first year was a central part of that Theme's work.

A key question considered was 'What do we really want students to gain from their first year in higher education?'

The overview of the First Year Theme's work concluded with a list of strategic challenges to:

- produce an explicit strategy for the first year
- shift resources into an increased provision for the first year
- improve the quality of the data about the first-year experience
- raise the status of first-year teaching
- define the overarching learning outcomes of the first year as 'academic literacy'.

# Governance and Theme structures

## Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC)

The selection, strategic direction and oversight of the Enhancement Themes are carried out by the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC); they are managed by QAA Scotland through funding provided by the SFC. SHEEC members are predominantly Vice-Principals or Assistant Principals for Learning and Teaching drawn from each of the Scottish higher education institutions, in addition to two student members.

SHEEC's strategic aim is to ensure that Scottish higher education institutions work together to develop, foster and embed a culture of quality enhancement in learning and teaching, through effective partnerships involving staff, students and other stakeholders.

SHEEC's activities are based on shared values and principles that underpin the work of the Scottish higher education sector. These include:

- **quality:** all students should have a high quality learning experience
- **partnership working:** all students should have a voice in shaping and engaging with their learning
- **high quality teaching:** all institutions support and reward professional commitment by staff to high quality teaching
- **a reflective approach to improvement:** continually improving and innovating learning and teaching practice, leading the way nationally and internationally
- **access:** seeking to provide access and learning opportunities for the widest possible range of learners who can benefit from Scottish programmes
- **an international outlook:** while taking pride in Scotland's educational heritage, working in a global context and seeking to learn from good practice wherever it can be found.

SHEEC works in close partnership with the Theme Leaders' Group, which reports to SHEEC. SHEEC chooses the broad topic for each Enhancement Theme programme, but the detail of how that topic will be worked out in practice is a matter for the Theme Leaders' Group. SHEEC meetings receive updates on the work of the Theme, and, where appropriate, SHEEC offers guidance to the Theme Leaders' Group.

## Theme Leaders' Group (TLG)

Each institution is invited to nominate their institutional representative on the Theme Leaders' Group (TLG). Nominees to the TLG combine their roles as institutional representatives with being the institutional contacts that also coordinate the institution's work on the Theme, through an Institutional Team. TLG members play a key role both in scoping and designing the work of the Theme at a national level, while also leading and coordinating their institution's work on the Theme.

The TLG also includes student members, nominated by the Theme Student Network; in addition, there are observers from the SFC, Universities Scotland, NUS Scotland, sparqs and the Higher Education Academy.

The TLG is a pivotal element of Theme delivery and, along with the Institutional Teams, is key to the effective design, delivery and progress monitoring of the Theme. It is also regarded as a place for networking and support, crucial elements in development and enhancement work.

## Institutional Teams

Institutional Teams are the 'cornerstone' of Theme delivery, through their promotion of institutional engagement, which is central to the Theme. Each Team has a lead member who is the representative for the institution on the TLG. The Teams also include at least one student member, often a Vice-President for Education (or equivalent) from their students' association, and other academic representatives. In recognition of the broad scope of the Student Transitions Theme, institutions have been encouraged to include representatives from professional services, as staff with these responsibilities also have crucial roles in enhancing the transitions of students.

## Theme Student Network

Student engagement is fundamental to higher education quality assurance partnership work in Scotland. The student member(s) on each higher education institution's Institutional Team are also automatically members of the Theme Student Network, which is administered and coordinated by QAA Scotland with support from sparqs. The Network is an open group, and any students or staff of students' associations are welcome to take part. The Network aims to enable

student representatives involved in the Theme to: discuss issues among themselves; feed into the TLG via the individual institutional representatives that sit on it (as well as to support those representatives); provide student members for the TLG; and lead project work on specific Theme areas of student interest.

Student members of the TLG are nominated from and by the Theme Student Network to bring the student perspective to the Enhancement Theme. The Network advises, takes direction from and reports into the TLG, thereby playing a key role in the Theme.



Members of the Theme Student Network and Professor Roni Bamber discuss their engagement with the Student Transitions Theme at the 2015 International Enhancement Themes Conference

## Key people

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| Chair of SHEEC   | Professor Peter McGeorge <sup>6</sup><br>Vice-Principal for Learning and Teaching<br>University of Aberdeen |
| Chair of the TLG | Professor Roni Bamber <sup>7</sup><br>Director, Centre for Academic Practice<br>Queen Margaret University   |

Day-to-day work related to the Theme is carried out by the Enhancement Team at QAA Scotland.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Professor Peter McGeorge: [www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/sheec/membership/peter-mcgeorge](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/sheec/membership/peter-mcgeorge).

<sup>7</sup> Professor Roni Bamber: [www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/tlg/roni-bamber](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/tlg/roni-bamber).

<sup>8</sup> Meet the QAA Scotland team: [www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/about-us/meet-the-team](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/about-us/meet-the-team).



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