Evaluation of the Impact of the Quality Enhancement Themes

The final report of the evaluation of the impact of the quality enhancement themes to the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC)

Executive Summary

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In total, 145 informants provided their experiences and perceptions of the impact of the themes. Not surprisingly, this has meant that there is a substantial volume of data to be taken into account. When the issue of dissemination of theme outcomes was discussed with those interviewed, one point which was raised time and time again was the need for much shorter and 'snappier' reports. Unfortunately, to do justice to the considerable amount of evidence collected in the course of the evaluation, the full report fails in that respect – mainly because of the inclusion of so many quotes. The latter illustrate points far more vividly and directly than a synthesis could and so I make no apology for using so many. However, this Executive Summary is intended to provide a more succinct and 'snappier' summary of the main points of the report for those without the time – or inclination – to read the full report.

1.   The aims of the evaluation

The aims of this evaluation are to:

1. provide formative independent evidence of the impact, at the broad sectoral level, of the impact of the QE themes on teaching and learning;
2. provide formative independent evidence of the impact of the overall effectiveness of the QE themes strategy to the Council and other stakeholders (for example, SHEEC and QAA Scotland);
3. be responsive and flexible enough to capture unintended outcomes and unanticipated effects;
4. develop criteria and impact indicators which will be of use in the further planning and management of the QE themes strategy at national and institutional levels.

2.   The evaluation approach

The evaluation design has the following characteristics:

1. the provision of formative independent evidence of the overall effectiveness of the Themes strategy to the Scottish HE sector, highlighting strengths, weaknesses and potential areas for development;
2. an account and an analysis of the impact of the themes from the perspective of key stakeholders;
3. a design which will be responsive and flexible enough to capture unintended outcomes and unanticipated effects.

The evaluation strategy

The evaluation involved the following enquiry activities:

- Key informant interviews with individuals uniquely placed to provide strategic knowledge of the QE themes. This group consisted of informants from:

  QAA Scotland
  SFC
  SHEEC
  Universities Scotland
  HEA
  Chairs of Theme Steering Committees
  sparqs
  NUS Scotland
  SLEEC

- Case study visits to a representative sample of 13 HEIs in which the experience and effects of the QE themes formed the focus for face-to-face interviews with a range of stakeholders (for example: student representatives, practitioners, institutional contacts, vice principals teaching and learning, deans and/or associate deans, heads of schools and departments, staff involved in theme-related activities)

- Telephone interviews with key stakeholders in the HEIs not visited as part of the institutional visits

The methodology

Throughout the evaluation, qualitative methods of data collection (semi-structured interviews) have been used. The use of interviews enables individual differences between participants' perceptions and experiences to be explored and provides an insight into how the meaning of the initiative (in this case, the quality enhancement themes) is understood by participants. Also, it allows variations in engagement and implementation at different sites to be documented.

3.   The evaluation findings

As indicated above, the key informant interviews and institutional visits generated a considerable quantity of very rich data. The findings below are derived from analysis of this data and cover the following broad issues:

- o Engagement
- o Impact
- o Dissemination
- o Strengths and weaknesses
- o Future directions

Engagement

Engagement at the institutional level

The key factors that tend to increase engagement at the institutional level are timeliness and relevance. Unsurprisingly, engagement with a theme (including 're-visiting' previous themes) is more likely to occur if the issues a theme addresses are of immediate concern to an institution or which is 'looming on the horizon'. The extent of engagement with a theme is also largely contingent upon the extent to which a theme corresponds to issues that are strategic priorities for an institution. This is particularly the case when a theme is seen as a means of helping an institution to address areas where a weakness has been identified or which have been identified as 'problem areas'. In terms of relevance, the current two themes Research Teaching Linkages and the First Year, have been very successful in promoting widespread engagement across the sector as they cover issues that are pertinent to every kind of HEI within the sector.

Mechanisms for engagement

Both within and outwith institutions there are a variety of mechanisms that serve to promote the themes. Some of these pre-date the themes, others have been set up specifically to ensure support for the themes and those who are involved with them. In terms of human 'mechanisms', there are three groups of staff within institutions who are most closely concerned with promoting the themes: the vice principals teaching and learning, the directors of teaching and learning and the institutional contacts. At a structural level, the various institutional committees, particularly those concerned with learning and teaching, provide a means of raising awareness of the themes amongst a wider range of stakeholders. Conferences, such as the annual QAA themes conference, serve a similar purpose as do various workshops and other events organised by the institutions or other agencies. The themes are also given prominence at internal reviews and ELIRs.

Forms of engagement

Rather than being focused on a small number of key players within institutions (the 'usual suspects') as was the case when the themes were first introduced as part of the QEF, engagement now seems to be far more diffuse across institutions. At the senior management level, vice principals teaching and learning are the most informed about the themes and, in the majority of institutions, are the main 'champions' for the themes. The associate deans teaching and learning (or their equivalents) 'sit' between senior and middle managers and have a pivotal role in promoting the themes within their schools or faculties. Below this level of academic staff engagement is less visible. Middle managers – such as heads of schools, heads of department and programme leaders - vary considerably in their engagement with the themes and lack of engagement of this group is often cited as a barrier to wider adoption of the themes within institutors. Practitioners have also been seen as not sufficiently engaged with the themes but this may not be strictly accurate. Their engagement may, in many cases, be 'unconscious' in that they are unaware of the themes as drivers of various activities with which, nevertheless, they willingly engage. The lack of student engagement has also been a concern in the

past but there is evidence of growing involvement of those students (student officers and student representatives) who have the authority to voice the concerns of the wider student population. The continuing involvement of sparqs in enhancement processes and the increasing involvement of SLEEC are welcome indications of the commitment of students to enhancing teaching and learning.

Impact

Particular themes will have an impact if, quite simply, they fit with institutional priorities. If they do not do this, then engagement will be negligible. Related to this is the issue of timeliness - the extent to which a theme's launch coincides with particular institutional needs *at that time*. That said, it would seem that the impact of certain themes has been minimal in many institutions whilst, in contrast, others have had quite significant impact in almost every institution. Certain themes have generated considerable interest across the sector – in particular the two most recent themes: The First Year and Research Teaching Linkages. However, although there are already some identifiable effects of both those themes, it may be too soon as yet to see their full impact. Of the earlier themes, a number of informants referred to Assessment and Employability as having been particularly influential in terms of impact. Whilst there does not seem to have been a comparable level of involvement with the Flexible Delivery theme at the time when it was running, a number of informants are now recognising its relevance to their current institutional concerns. Integrative Assessment (cited as a 'past theme' on the QAA's enhancement themes website) was frequently mentioned in the context of a theme which seems to have made very little impression at the time.

Factors affecting impact

Timing issues

One of the main criticisms of the themes that we noted in our evaluation of the QEF was that having two themes per year was inappropriate. Concerns were expressed over addressing the themes in sufficient depth over such a comparatively short time-span. The number of themes and the speed with which they were rolled out to the sector was cited as a main barrier to involvement. A frequently-voiced criticism was that there were too many themes in progress at any one time and, consequently, there had not been enough time to introduce and embed changes before the next themes was launched. The five year plan for the themes for 2005-2010 proposed a move away from this initial approach, based on an annual process for identifying the two themes for the following year, to a more strategic and flexible programme of themes. Related to the timing of the themes but a different issue to the timescale of the themes, is that of timeliness. If the time was not right for a particular institution to participate in a theme, then impact will have been minimal. However, some themes, such as Flexible Delivery, which were not regarded as particularly relevant to institutional priorities at the time, are now being re-visited by some institutions in the light of changing priorities

Ownership

The ownership of the themes by the sector had been another underlying issue picked up by the QEF evaluation. There were criticisms that the themes had a top-down feel that did not sit easily with the spirit of institutional ownership that the QEF aimed to bring to quality processes. It was not so much the *choice* of the theme topics that was criticised but the means by which *decisions* on the choice of themes appeared to have been made. There was a feeling that there had been insufficient consultation with the sector in identifying priorities. There is a general acknowledgement that the themes link very well with current developments within the sector and that most have been relevant and useful in helping institutions to address priorities. This criticism arose far less frequently during the course of the present evaluation of the themes. Institutions themselves are now directly involved with the themes compared to the rather more passive role they played within the earlier themes. Informants were able to cite many examples of how well certain themes (the more recent ones in particular), reflected issues that were of importance to them. In fact the point was made that it would have been surprising if the themes did *not* match with priorities within the sector as they were selected by their institutional representatives on SHEEC with that in mind.

Incentives

Most institutional managers view the contribution, or potential contribution, of theme activities as a 'reward' in itself. However, the additional financial resources attached to the current two themes, although this is fairly small in terms of overall institutional budgets, has been an additional and welcome bonus. Although not directly attached to the themes, the funding for employability from the Funding Council has also had an impact in that activities highlighted in some institutions by the Employability theme have been further developed and enhanced.

Forms of impact

The most obvious and tangible forms of impact of the themes – those effects which are clearly identifiable by informants – can be fairly readily identified. By this we mean new policies or strategies that can be linked directly with the influence of a particular theme, actual changes to practices or the formation of communities of practice around theme issues. Other forms of impact are less tangible but may be much more significant in terms of a deeper level of impact: cultural change within institutions, for example, or the general climate of reflection and debate that the themes have generated, not only at the institutional level but across the sector as a whole.

Disentangling impact

Evaluating impact within the short-term and post-hoc constraints of this evaluation presents some considerable challenges, not least of these is attempting to sift out the specific effects of the themes from those of other drivers for change within institutions. Many informants could 'feel' the impact but would find it extremely difficult to pinpoint specific links to the themes. A number of references were made to the fact that where theme-related activities were already taking place *implicitly,* the

themes have served to make these more *explicit.* Even where it was difficult to isolate the contributions of themes to institutional developments, the themes were certainly seen as adding value to work that was already going on. The point was often made that various developments would have happened anyway at some stage but the themes may very well have added more focus to planning or extra momentum to on-going activities.

'Visible' effects

Informants were able to pinpoint various examples of the ways in which specific themes had had a direct impact on practices or policies. Students interviewed made a number of references to the First Year theme as being particularly relevant to them (as students) and were aware of quite specific outcomes in terms of changes to teaching practices. Other examples of specific changes to practices or policies included a greater focus on theme-related topics in institutional teaching and learning strategies, changes to assessment practices, a much stronger emphasis on employability, publication of newsletters to publicise theme activity etc.

Networks of practice

In simple terms the concept of a network of practice refers to the overall set of various types of informal, emergent social networks that facilitate learning and knowledge sharing between individuals conducting practice-related tasks. There is evidence that such networks are emerging through participants' engagement with certain themes. This is perhaps particularly the case with most recent themes which emphasise cross-institutional collaboration. The networks of institutional contacts have been an effective vehicle for the contacts to share experiences and examples of good practice and it is to be hoped that some of these will continue in some form beyond the lifetime of present theme projects.

Awareness-raising

There were numerous references made to the value of the themes in raising awareness and debate of the theme-related issues at a sectoral level. Having a common focus for attention across the whole sector is felt to be extremely beneficial. The impact of the themes in terms of building up a climate of debate around key issues attracted a considerable volume of positive comments from informants. A particularly stimulating approach incorporated in the QE themes strategy to strengthening the impact of the themes has been the contribution of international speakers to various conferences and events. Many informants had found their input very interesting and thought-provoking and at least one HEI has invited international visitors to share experiences. In the long-term the rather less tangible forms of impact may well prove to be as significant in their contribution to bringing about a culture change within institutions as the more 'measurable' effects such as, for example, changes in induction and retention rates or PDP and graduate destinations.

Dissemination

Impact is dependent upon the extent to which the sector at large is aware of what the themes have achieved and the case studies revealed a number of challenges for the theme strategy that had not yet been fully resolved.

Process and product

Compared to the earlier themes, there is a much stronger sense of wider participation and active involvement of institutional staff with the achievements of the present themes, rather than was the case with the earlier themes. With the latter, the outcomes were, to a large extent, produced by the theme steering groups and then 'presented' to the sector. One of the consequences of more active and participative involvement is that it has opened up a debate on the relative value of process (taking part in theme activities) and product (the tangible outcomes such as reports). The increase in active involvement with the themes at the institutional level has shifted the balance in the value attached to the *end results* of the themes to a much greater awareness of the benefits to be gained from *participation* in theme activities – not quite as an end in itself but as a much more meaningful component of the implementation of the themes than was the case previously. However, some form of product is still needed to provide a permanent record of the outcomes that can be made use of by others not immediately involved.

Written outputs

Of all the methods used to disseminate the outputs of the themes, written reports attracted the most comment from informants and it was the length of some of these reports that was most likely to be criticised. Many of the earlier themes had produced reports that were regarded as far too long for busy academics to find the time to read. Consequently, many of these 'sat on shelves' and were little used. The point was made that those producing the reports may feel an obligation to provide 'value for money' by producing long reports or may feel they have so much to report that a shorter version would not do justice to reporting the outcomes. Not surprisingly then, in terms of written material, informants would prefer much shorter 'snappier' reports that allowed them to access the key findings faster. References to the appropriate URLs would also be useful so that readers could look on-line for more detail. A number of informants referred to the Integrative Assessment reports as a model for other themes. Most of those interviewed welcomed outputs such as case studies that provided practical examples of how the themes might be applied in their own institutional context. Not all of the reports were felt to have been written in a way to which their target audiences could easily relate. Some of the language used, for example, was felt to be too esoteric or too jargonistic. There was also criticism that some reports were not published soon enough once the work of the theme reached completion. The common thread running through these various criticisms of text-based reports is the need to be able to access resources quickly, easily and when needed. Long verbose reports are, therefore, not ideal in terms of meeting these criteria. On-line resources, on the other hand, allow almost immediate access to a wealth of information.

On-line resources

Few would describe the QE themes website as colourful or visually exciting but it serves its purpose in providing information and resources from past and present themes and, in fact, there were very few negative comments about the themes website – apart from a few complaints that the website was not particularly easy to navigate. Another point raised was that the medium was not being exploited as well as it could be in terms of its potential as a learning tool.

Conferences and other events

As a dissemination vehicle, the annual QE themes conference organised by the QAA attracted a mixed response. There was the criticism that the conference tends to attract the same people each year – those who can afford the time to attend. Those who could most benefit from going (such as 'chalkface' teaching practitioners) often do not have the time to do so. Certainly, the comments from practitioners who *had* attended the conference confirm how useful they found the event. However, a number of informants suggested that there were alternative ways of disseminating theme outputs that would provide the more direct personal input that many informants preferred.

Suggestions for alternative forms of dissemination

A number of informants pointed out that there is no 'one size fits all' method and that there probably needs to be a variety of dissemination methods so that people can chose what method best suits their needs. A number of informants suggested that the way to provide a more direct personal input was through a more localised approach to dissemination rather than through the rather more impersonal large annual conference. Speakers coming to institutions to provide first-hand accounts of theme outcomes were suggested by a number of informants as a very effective way to bring a more direct and interactive perspective to dissemination. Perhaps not surprisingly given their experience of being part of cross-institutional networks, institutional contacts were particularly keen on the idea of face-to-face dissemination.

Strengths, weaknesses and future directions

Informants were asked their perceptions of the strengths of the present themes strategy and, conversely, its weaknesses. They were also asked if they could suggest any ways in which the themes might be improved.

Strengths

Encouragingly, this question elicited far more responses than when informants were asked to identify weaknesses. Their responses can be grouped under three broad categories:

1.	Common concerns
2.	The focus of the themes
3.	Ownership and management

Common concerns

The majority of those asked about strengths of the themes strategy cited the fact that the QE themes acted as a means of focussing debate, raising awareness of specific topics across the whole of the Scottish HE sector and served to foster a 'collective consciousness' of key issues of common concern. The current themes in particular encourage and support the sharing of good practice between institutions. Related to this issue of focus, some informants referred to the emphasis on the student experience inherent in all the themes as a particularly welcome aspect of the themes. The greater focus on enhancement rather than assurance and on improvement rather than judgment was also regarded as strong point.

The focus of the themes

The topics for themes were generally felt to be well-chosen to represent shared interests across the sector. The fact that they are selected by institutional representatives (SHEEC members) is seen as ensuring that they *are* relevant and also strengthens the feeling that they are owned by the sector rather than being imposed 'from on high'. Another strong feature is the increasing sense of inter-connectivity of the themes. Some informants now perceive the themes as having been chosen to fit well together and to link up. Supporting the view that the themes have been well-chosen to reflect general sectoral concerns and interests, engagement with the themes was said to have certainly generated enthusiasm and opened up ideas to new possibilities.

Ownership and management

There is a strong sense that the QE themes are part of a distinctively Scottish approach to enhancement and that this adds to the sense of ownership. Though perhaps not strictly relating to the issue of ownership, there were a number of positive references to the advantage of the funding that was attached to the recent themes. Although the amounts were comparatively small, they had been very well-received. There were a number of favourable comments concerning the management of the themes. The overall organization of the theme programme by SHEEC was felt to further underline the 'ownership' of the themes by the sector. QAA Scotland is also felt to be extremely supportive. The 'hands-on' approachability of its officers was very much appreciated and there were numerous references to the good relationship between QAA Scotland and the HE sector.

Weaknesses

As we mentioned above, the strengths of the themes certainly outnumbered perceived weaker aspects. There were three broad areas of weaknesses identified:

1. The frequency of the themes
2. The focus of the themes
3. Communication

The frequency of themes

This remains the most frequent criticism of the theme programme. Informants felt that there were too many themes coming thick and fast at the start and this had tended to create negativity. The five year plan to ease the number of themes at any one time had been welcomed but, to some informants, does not seem to have sufficiently addressed the underlying problems. The hope was expressed that this issue would be addressed in the near future by having a period of integration and consolidation rather than by the introduction of a new theme when the two present themes were completed.

The focus of the themes

In general, as noted above, themes *do* tend to reflect priorities for most institutions. However, there are bound to be instances where this is not the case and it was suggested that a badly-chosen theme could damage the whole concept of the enhancement theme approach.

Communication

Finally, some informants (albeit a minority) felt that there could be better systems of communication between QAA and the sector.

Suggestions for improvements

Predictably (or perhaps encouragingly if this is taken as a sign of general satisfaction with the *status quo*) informants did not offer many suggestions for improvements. Suggestions that *were* offered related mainly to time issues (reducing the frequency of the themes) and to the focus of the themes.

The frequency of the themes

The revised strategy for the themes with the more open timeframe was seen as a move in the right direction which could be built on to give a much greater degree of flexibility in future.

The focus of the themes

Some informants felt that there were topics that could usefully be addressed by a future theme, most notably Internationalisation to which a number of references were made. However, others felt that the time had now come for synthesising the outputs already available and taking a more holistic view of the themes as a coherent resource. One suggestion was that perhaps it was now time for the themes to shift from the generic to a much more specific focus.

To sum up this final section on the interview data: clearly, the themes are more likely to have a positive impact if most of stakeholders participate willingly and enthusiastically rather than with a grudging acceptance. It is encouraging to report that there appears to be a generally high level of satisfaction with the themes in that most informants could more readily identify strengths than weaknesses.

Overall Conclusions

The nature of change

As has often been claimed, bringing about systemic change within higher education is not a simple or quick process. It may, therefore, be still be too soon to look for examples of specific forms of impact of even the first two themes – particularly as some informants were thinking now of re-visiting previous themes in the light of changing institutional priorities. Complex change such as that intended by the QEF as a whole and embedded within the QE themes, cannot be reduced to a simple or easily identifiable line of determination and what may be important is to be able to focus more on alignment i.e. the extent to which daily practice is beginning to show the characteristics of an enhancement approach, rather than direct attribution. Certainly there are encouraging signs that this alignment is taking place. Informants were aware of a general enhancement 'culture' within institutions even if they could not, in many cases, link this directly with the effects of the QE themes.

Bringing it all together

We have already referred to stakeholders' perceptions of the themes coming together as a more coherent programme rather than seeming like discrete themes. The emergence of an integrative theme which would help to further strengthen this connectivity would be welcomed by a number of those interviewed rather than having another new theme with a completely different focus. Related to this issue of integration, there was certainly a sense that responsibility for the themes, and perhaps all aspects of quality enhancement in general, are now more devolved across institutions. No longer does 'quality' appear to be mainly seen as the responsibility of a specific Quality Officer but falls under the remit of a wider group of staff such as vice principals learning and teaching, associate deans academic, directors of learning and teaching and the institutional contacts. Of course, with this more diffuse approach, there is the danger that, in some institutions, there is no coherent overall plan to manage quality enhancement. Certainly, during the course of this evaluation, we were aware of some fairly senior staff who had little awareness of the themes. As part of our evaluation of the QEF the Lancaster team looked at the connections between the QEF and other externally-funded teaching and learning agencies and initiatives with which Scottish HEIs are involved. One such agency is the Higher Education Academy (HEA). We concluded that there were considerable potential benefits from the Academy working alongside the QEF in delivering the enhancement agenda but recognised that there was also the potential for dissonance and negative overlaps between the two initiatives. Significantly, in the present evaluation there were frequent references to the role that HEA *could*, but does not yet, play within the QE theme programme. Certainly, if there is any intention to focus the themes rather less generically in future, then it would seem that HEA could play a very significant part in helping to sharpen the disciplinary focus of the themes. Whilst there are clear advantages to sharing cross-disciplinary practices, the themes have covered this quite extensively. If there is to any 're-visiting' of previous themes, it may be that 'translating' outputs to meet particular disciplinary needs might be a useful future path to take and, in this context, HEA would be a valuable source of expertise.

Finally, mention must be made here of the contribution of the Guide to the Outcomes of the Themes produced for SHEEC. This pulls together the outcomes of all the themes to date (with the exception of Research Teaching Linkages which was still on-going when the Guide was published) in a comprehensive and interesting way to provide a very valuable summary of theme resources.

Impact indicators

We see little point in 're-inventing the wheel' by producing completely new indicators of impact for the themes. As well as the set of indicators for the themes developed by the Lancaster team as part of the evaluation of the QEF, there are also in circulation Indicators of Enhancement recently developed by a Working Group convened by SHEEC. Most of the latter can also be used very effectively to evaluate the extent to which the themes are contributing to the overall enhancement agenda. Although designed to be used to reflect on the QE strategy as a whole, they can be adapted effectively to fit the specific context of the themes.

In this section of the report we refer to the 'QEF' set of indicators in the context of analysing the present data. We feel it is illuminative to compare how we used the indicators to interpret evidence as part of that evaluation with the results from this current evaluation of impact so present these in terms of 'then' and 'now':

- o *Teaching staff have learned by using the enhancement engagements as a resource*

THEN: Whilst we had anecdotal evidence of, for example, changes being made to assessment practices within institutions that had been inspired by the assessment theme or how engagement with the employability theme had led to changes being made to ways in which students were prepared for employment, we felt that there was clearly a need for a more systematic evaluation of the extent to which teaching staff were engaging with, and learning from, the QE themes and, indeed, the other dimensions of the framework.

NOW: Those teaching practitioners who had been closely involved with theme activities (such as the projects as part of the two most recent themes) have certainly learned and profited from their engagement. The extent to which other staff not so closely involved have 'learned' remains patchy. The institutional contacts in many institutions have been instrumental in involving staff with the themes through organizing various events or by publicizing the themes throughout their institutions. It certainly seems to be the case that far *more* staff are aware of the quality enhancement themes. However, *knowing about* the themes is not the same as *learning from* them and we maintain that there would be considerable value in a more in-depth and systematic exploration of this important issue.

- o *Relationship can be traced between the enhancement themes and institutional policies and practices*

THEN: There were pockets of practical activity emerging within institutions that can be directly attributed to engagement with various themes. There were also examples

of institutional policies being put into place that were linked with some of the themes - for example, some institutions had developed more coherent institutional strategies towards assessment.

NOW: A similar picture is emerging of the current situation in respect of the impact of the themes upon policies and practices. The current two themes may well prove to have had far more of a widespread impact in this respect than some of the previous ones because they fit so well with the concerns of the majority of institutions in the sector. For example, in a number of institutions induction policies had been revised to take into account the findings of the various activities of the First Year theme. The point was made that various changes to policies and practices would probably have happened anyway in the fullness of time but the themes had provided an extra impetus and motivation to progress faster with these.

o *A body of knowledge and a research agenda are developed in Scotland around the enhancement themes*

THEN: The five year rolling plan for the quality enhancement themes had set out some key changes to the strategic approach to the programme – one of which had been the introduction of six inter-related topic-based themes varying in scope and duration and allowing for a more research-based approach.

NOW: A body of knowledge is certainly in evidence and the collective outputs of the themes have provided a rich resource on a wide range of aspects relating to teaching and learning. The extent to which a research agenda is building up is less clear. Papers have been presented at conferences and there has been considerable interest in the themes from other countries outwith Scotland but whether this is contributing towards a research agenda remains unclear. The emphasis seems to be more on practical solutions rather than on pedagogic or other research. There is clearly the potential to develop research around the considerable body of knowledge that is building up and it may be, as the theme programme matures and embeds within the sector, that research may move closer to the forefront of activities.

o *Themes are identified consultatively*

THEN: There had been complaints from the sector that themes had been imposed with insufficient consultation as to sectoral needs and priorities. QAA and SFC had responded to these complaints by sector-wide discussion about the overall strategy of the work of the enhancement themes. As a result of this, the five year rolling plan for the themes was introduced. There had been general appreciation of the fact that the five year plan for the themes demonstrated the willingness of the SFC and the QAA to listen to the sector by providing a programme more closely aligned with institutional concerns and the work of SHEEC resulted in a much more finely tuned approach to institutional capacity building. This shift and the topics for current and future themes (particularly the first year experience) were regarded as highly relevant and well-chosen.

NOW: There were very few criticisms of the way in which the themes were selected. The majority view was that they had been well-chosen to reflect areas of common concern. Very little references were made to themes being 'imposed' on the sector.

This increased sense of ownership makes it far more likely that there will be greater engagement with the themes and, hopefully, a deeper and more widespread impact.

- o *The development of learning and teaching themes is identified as a resource by academic managers.*

THEN: We indicated that this is an indicator that may be more appropriate for institutions themselves to consider and one on which, at that stage, we had little evidence at the sector level.

NOW: There is no doubt that academic managers are now far more knowledgeable about the themes and aware of how they can, and frequently do, feed into policy-making. Senior managers were able to refer to how particular themes had, directly or indirectly, influenced institutional strategies.

Issues for consideration

A fairly complex picture of perceptions of impact has emerged from this evaluation which, although comparatively short-term, elicited a rich source of data from a wide range of stakeholders in the QE themes. As noted previously, an evaluation of impact such as this which relies purely on qualitative data could certainly be criticised on methodological grounds in terms of lack of 'scientific' rigour. However, we consider that it meets its purpose of providing formative independent evidence of the overall effectiveness of the themes strategy and highlights strengths, weaknesses and potential areas for development through an account and an analysis of the impact of the themes from the perspective of key stakeholders. We conclude this report with some points arising from the evaluation (in no particular order of importance) that the commissioners may wish to consider when planning the future direction of the themes.

- o Continuing to attach even modest amounts of funding to themes may maximise the potential impact of activities;

- o Careful thought needs to be given to decisions on possible future themes as there is certainly evidence of 'theme fatigue';

- o Are there sufficient incentives for teaching practitioners to engage with the themes? There are few extrinsic 'rewards or recognition' attached to participation;

- o Communities of practice are being built up (for example, amongst institutional contacts) which may need additional support to encourage their continuation past the lifespan of a theme;

- o Dissemination of theme outcomes could be improved in terms of the format (a clear preference for 'short and snappy') and the speed with which outcomes are published.