

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)

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1. Introduction

This report details the findings of a seven-month evaluation of the impact of the Quality Enhancement Themes by CSET (Centre for the Study of Education and Training), Lancaster University. The evaluation was commissioned by SHEEC (Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee) and funded by QAA Scotland. The conclusions are based on data collected through face-to-face interviews and a smaller number of telephone interviews. Informants represent every HEI within the Scottish HE sector and cover the range of stakeholders from vice principals to student representatives. 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.

2. The context

The Quality Enhancement Themes are one of the five inter-related elements of the Quality Enhancement Framework. The aim of the themes programme is to enhance the student learning experience in Scottish higher education by identifying specific areas for development and encouraging academic and support staff and students to share current good practice and collectively generate ideas and models for innovation in learning and teaching. The work of the enhancement themes is planned and directed by the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC) who manage the programme of enhancement theme activity in the context of a five-year programme. During the 'lifetime' of a theme, the balance of support provided by SHEEC shifts from organizing projects to a greater focus on dissemination of theme outcomes and supporting HEIs in engaging with these to best meet their needs.

Since the inception of the themes, the strategy for supporting institutional engagement with the themes and for promoting the outcomes of theme activity has been revised. This strategy is based on a move away from the themes being taken forward by SHEEC as a series of projects and workshops to theme activity taking place in a number of contexts. The strategy incorporates a much greater focus on institutional activities and on cross-sector sharing. The most recent themes, The First Year and Research Teaching Linkages, reflect these changes to the strategy. Crucially, SHEEC's role is to create a context and framework of support for HEIs in their own consideration of theme issues.

A key feature of the strategy for the themes is the greater involvement at the 'ground level' through the active involvement of institutional contacts/coordinators and middle managers (such as associate deans teaching and learning). The institutional contacts are of particular importance here as they provide a channel of communication from HEIs to SHEEC and vice versa.

3. 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.

As this report will illustrate, these aims have, to a large extent, been met. Certainly, in terms of the first three of the four aims above, the considerable volume of data collected during this relatively short-term evaluation provides ample evidence of the impact of the themes and the themes strategy and outcomes, both intended and unanticipated. The fourth aim is slightly more problematic as developing a new set of criteria and impact indicators may well be seen as 're-inventing the wheel'. As part of the Final Report of the Lancaster team's evaluation of the QEF in 2006, initial 'indicators of progress' for each of the five elements of the QEF were developed in consultation with the sector. Those suggested for the QE themes remain broadly relevant and, in this report, are used as a (post hoc) analytical framework for the findings of this evaluation. Indicators of enhancement are also currently being developed by a Working Group commissioned by SHEEC. Both the latter and the indicators developed by the external evaluators are sufficiently broad to be used flexibly to meet particular institutional contexts and circumstances.

4. 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.

In brief, the approach combines two powerful traditions of evaluation – *Utilization-Focussed Evaluation* and *Theory-Based Evaluation*. Utilization-Focussed Evaluation simply means taking care that the evaluation design and processes are negotiated with those who are likely to use the evaluation in order that both the process and the outcomes are likely to be useful to sponsors and other agreed stakeholders. It is well-suited to the task of providing key stakeholder groups with evidence they can use to judge the impact of the Quality Enhancement theme strategy. Theory-Based Evaluation focuses on the connections between intentions, strategies and policy or

programme realities. It has a firm basis in evidence but is open to unintended and unanticipated processes and outcomes. It helps to articulate both the formal and the informal theories of change embedded in policy strategies and the adaptations and modifications which occur as a policy is created in practice.

To these two traditions we add a preference for appreciative enquiry as a formative evaluation approach. Appreciative enquiry begins by looking at what is working and why. Invariably this reveals areas in need of improvement and other attention. However, whereas a critical enquiry approach encourages colleagues to try to ‘fake good’, appreciative enquiry favours engagement and disclosure – and disclosure and openness are crucial to successful formative evaluation.

A key focus of the evaluation is the extent to which the themes are having an impact upon teaching and learning. We offer the framework below for understanding the way in which enhancement theme activities might create ‘deeper’ effects across institutions and across the sector. We use the metaphor of an ‘enclave’ to depict initial pockets of theme-related activity. The process of deepening and spreading impact, we argue, involves the principles, ways, means and approaches that constitute excellent practice moving out from these pockets or enclaves of practice and influencing the wider institution and, ultimately, the sector. To have deeper effects therefore would involve the programme as a whole shaping practices at the consequential (5), collaborative (6) and refocusing (7) levels in the Table below.

Table 1: Forms of impact

7	Refocusing	A new community has emerged and is marked by common sites. New ideas are developing for taking the innovation onwards.	Attention now on adaptation, major changes, alternatives to original ideas, creativity.
6	Collaboration	Becoming systemic: moving from enclaves to wider influence	Coordinating and cooperating with other stakeholders in using new practices, systems and processes, creating effective networks across the sector
5	Consequence	Evaluation of new enclaves	Attention on impact on students, staff, departments and whole institution of new practices and processes, relevance, evaluation and implied changes
4	Management	New enclaves developing	Attention on difficulties in the processes and tasks involved in developing new practices, processes and systems
3	Institutional/personal	New enclaves beginning to form	Begins to analyse effects and impacts on existing systems and practice
2	Informational	Bridgeheads forming	Wider emerging awareness and interest in knowing more, thinking of implications for the institution or for other networks, such as subject or regional ones.
1	Awareness	Bridgeheads forming	Initial awareness of innovative practice embodied in the QE themes and engagement strategies begin to establish new bridgeheads
0	Formation of an enclave of excellent practice	An enclave promoting excellent practice	Relatively self contained innovative practice rewarded through the QE themes programme

4.1 The evaluation strategy

The evaluation involved the following enquiry activities:

i) *Key informant interviews* with approximately 5 -10 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

Informants were interviewed individually. Issues covered include:

- Involvement/role in relation to the themes;
- What appears to be working well;
- What appears to be problematic;
- Relationship of the themes to other initiatives;
- Priorities for the future development of the themes;
- Views on the themes as a strategy for change.

ii) *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). In constructing the sample of HEIs, institutions were selected from the following four categories:

'Ancient'	1
Pre-1992	5
Post-1992	4
Specialist institution	3

Informants were interviewed individually or, where appropriate in small groups. Issues covered include:

- Involvement/role in relation to past and present Quality Enhancement themes
- Extent of engagement with the themes within the institution
- Impact of the themes
- The dissemination of the outcomes of the themes (e.g. perceptions of effectiveness of strategy, institutional engagement with the outcomes)
- Perceived strengths and weaknesses of the themes
- Suggestions for future developments of the theme strategy.

iii) Telephone interviews with key stakeholders in the HEIs not visited as part of the institutional visits. The same issues were addressed as above.

4.2 Evaluation challenges

The main *challenge* for this evaluation relates to the fact that it is intended to assess the impact of the themes. Impact evaluations attempt to attribute change to a specific programme or policy and establish what would have happened without the intervention (the counterfactual) by using scientific, sometimes experimental, methodologies such as randomized control trials or comparison groups. In such evaluations, the central impact question is what would have happened to those receiving the intervention (in this case the QE themes) if they had not in fact received the intervention? Ideally, a comparison group would be set up which is as similar as possible (in observable and unobservable dimensions) to those receiving the intervention. This comparison allows for the establishment of definitive causality – attributing observed changes resulting from experience of the QE themes, whilst removing confounding factors. Clearly this was not possible in the case of the sector-wide initiative of the QE themes. Interventions are not conducted in a vacuum, and it is extremely difficult to determine the extent to which change (positive or negative) can be attributed to the intervention, rather than to other institutional factors or interventions by other agencies.

Another important methodological issue is that the practices and ways of thinking embodied in the quality enhancement themes may not be attributable to the strategy itself by stakeholders. This means that evaluations must use an ‘inferential’ approach where evidence of embodied practice is sought rather than a simplistic notion of attribution. Our approach puts a premium on what is happening, rather than the lost cause of cast iron attribution.

Another issue is that certain outcomes or forms of impact take time to materialize – and, as a number of informants emphasised, this is particularly the case in the context of higher education. Even in the case of the earlier themes (Responding to Student Needs and Assessment), the impact in some institutions is only now beginning to filter through in terms of effects on policies and practices. A longitudinal study would, it could rightly be argued, provide more reliable and comprehensive data than that provided by a short-term evaluation such as this.

Whilst we acknowledge therefore that the methodology adopted for this evaluation could be criticised on the basis of scientific rigour and validity, we believe that by presenting the viewpoints of a substantial number of stakeholders within the sector, we have been able to provide a reliable and reasonably accurate indication of the ‘state of play’ regarding the impact of the themes to date.

4.3 The evaluation timetable

The three main phases of evaluation activity are summarised below.

Phase 1: Preliminary Phase

Purpose: i) to establish baseline data to inform the subsequent phases of the evaluation
ii) to ensure that HEIs understand the purpose of the evaluation and how it will be conducted

Method: i) inspection and collation of existing data
ii) design of research instruments (interview schedules)
iii) 'key informant' interviews
iv) introductory letter to all HEIs
v) selection of, and contact with, case study institutions

Timing: February/March 2008

Outcomes: i) research data to inform the next phases of the evaluation
ii) interview schedules to be used in the main phase of the evaluation

Phase 2: Main Phase (data collection and analysis)

Purpose: i) to gather evidence of the impact of the themes from the perceptions and experiences of key stakeholders (e.g. institutional contacts, vice principals teaching and learning, deans and/or assistant deans, HoDs, project directors, student representatives)

Method: i) case study visits
ii) telephone interviews
ii) analysis of survey data

Timing: March/June 2008

Outcome: i) research data to inform the final report

Phase: Final Phase

Purpose: i) to prepare the final report

Method: i) analysis of interview data
ii) production of final report

Timing: July/August 2008

Outcome: i) Final report to SHEEC (September 2008)

In addition, oral and written progress reports were provided to SHEEC at their meetings. All the deadlines have been met and reports delivered on time.

4.4 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. The advantages of qualitative methods over quantitative methods are well-documented. In this context, the particular advantages are that they:

- allow the participants to describe what is meaningful or important to them using their own words rather than being restricted to predetermined categories - thus participants may feel more relaxed and candid
- provide high credibility and face validity and make intuitive sense to the intended audiences
- allow the evaluator to probe for more details and ensure that participants are interpreting questions in the way they were intended.

Whilst survey methods are a more convenient way of collecting data from participants who are widely dispersed geographically, it was comparatively easy to visit the key informants and each of the 13 institutions for the case study visits. One disadvantage of this method that became obvious during the final phase is that analyzing and interpreting qualitative interviews is, arguably, much more time-consuming than analyzing and interpreting quantitative data. The transcripts produced a large volume of material that needed to be categorized and made meaningful and this was a particularly time-consuming aspect of the evaluation.

5. 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:

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

Verbatim quotes are used throughout to illustrate the points raised. As informants were promised anonymity, any references that might identify particular people or institutions have been omitted.

5.1 Engagement with the themes

We begin with exploring the extent to which the case studies institutions have been engaged with the quality enhancement themes. This sets the context for the subsequent section on the main issue at the heart of this evaluation – the impact of the quality enhancement themes. It is a fairly substantive section as engagement

and impact are, of course, inter-related - although the degree of impact does not necessarily correlate directly with the degree of engagement. In some cases, very few staff have been strongly engaged with the themes but nevertheless their contribution has had significant impact both within and outwith their institutions. In most institutions there are distinct forms of engagement amongst staff – ranging from close involvement to very little awareness of the themes. All those interviewed were asked about their personal involvement and their perceptions of where engagement was most likely to take place within their institutions and what form this engagement was likely to take.

5.1.1 Engagement at the institutional level

At a senior management level, vice principals teaching and learning (or their equivalents) tend to be the initial points of contact for the themes within institutions. Most vice principals teaching and learning are members of SHEEC (Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee) and so are instrumental in taking decisions regarding the planning and management of the themes at the sector-level. Also, a number of vice principals teaching and learning are, or have been, members of the various theme steering committees. One vice principal admitted that his reason for sitting on a steering group was quite instrumental:

I got onto the Steering Committee of that (theme) because I was very scared that the traditional universities would run away with it, and the idea that you had to have blue skies research otherwise you couldn't be a university therefore what are organisations like (ours) doing actually? And so I thought that it was important to get involved.

This involvement with theme steering groups and with SHEEC obviously provides a good 'external' knowledge of the themes - although this need not necessarily equate to *active* engagement of senior managers with theme activity within their own institutions.

Not surprisingly, the extent to which institutions have engaged with particular themes depends to a large extent on how the themes match institutional priorities:

The question is more likely to be, rather than 'what is the degree of engagement with the enhancement themes', 'what is the degree of engagement with *this* enhancement theme?' I think it's really important that that issue about the fit of the enhancement theme to institutions is clear because the answer will be very different depending on where you fit amongst those seven themes – you'll get a different answer to that engagement. There's not really one answer that we can give you and I don't think that we have a kind of institutional mechanism that kind of clicks into action when a new enhancement theme comes along. (vice principal)

There are specific teaching level things that are in our learning and teaching strategy as actions which are informed by the themes and they provide a very useful resource on that basis. I think there's probably more we could do on that front but it's about resources and priorities and trying to do what is best for the university at this particular time. And I think that's probably why we feel that the themes don't stop in terms of the engagement – the engagement happens perhaps during the theme year but actually, even more importantly it might be what's happening in later years. It's a different sort of engagement but it's still happening. (vice principal)

In some institutions engagement in particular themes had been strongest when a theme addressed an issues or issues that the institution had identified as areas that they wished to improve.

We went to conference presentations on the First Year theme – we looked at how we can learn from other institutions. We're carrying out a survey at the moment looking at personal tutor systems and things like that across the institution....Our awareness of that as a problem area has been heightened as a result of being involved in the First Year theme. (senior manager)

Another example is that the NSS (the National Student Survey in which more Scottish HEIs are now participating) has highlighted the fact that many students are unhappy about feedback and so this is an area to which many HEIs are now giving greater attention. In this context, the Assessment theme has been re-visited by a number of institutions as it now has particular relevance.

Themes also become more relevant if any kind of institutional restructuring is taking place. For example, in one institution major restructuring was seen as a vehicle for change and senior management had drawn up a number of strategic objectives which mapped on very well to at least three of the quality enhancement themes:

Now it has been really helpful for us that Research Teaching Linkages came along as we effectively wanted to do that. Employability was great because it came along just at the time when we said we're going to do all these things – and similarly with the First Year. So in that sense we were pre-engaged as it were, pre-engaged with the topic on some of these and then in other cases it was more of a watching brief. We don't have a way of engaging with the themes that are separate from the way in which we engage with our strategic development. (senior manager)

An interesting point that was made by two senior managers was that engagement with the themes tended to be stronger when links were made between themes – that is, rather than being seen as separate and discrete areas of activity, the themes are regarded as constituting a coherent body of resource that fits well with overall institutional teaching and learning strategies:

If you think about Employability, if you think about Research and Teaching linkages, I think the penny's dropping across departments how thinking about research and teaching linkages can help with employability. So if we reflect on research and teaching linkages as a means of delivering on employability, these are not two separate themes and if you think about how we structure that in terms of the first year experience, you can see how you've got cross-fertilisation across the themes and I know that thinking's gone on at a departmental level. (vice principal)

From the perspective of senior managers, engagement with the themes at the wider institutional level is, therefore, contingent on various factors – relevance to strategic concerns and 'timeliness' being crucial. Not all themes have been relevant to all institutions at particular times and so engagement, at the institutional level, has been variable. One informant, talking of the two themes with which he has been most closely involved said:

If you take the 20 Scottish institutions, with the two themes I'm talking about, all of them have a level of engagement but that level of engagement varies and that's always assumed to be permissible - to be expected with the themes because obviously institutions have other agendas and so on as well. In fact, with both of the themes that I'm talking about, (this university's) level of engagement I think has been quite high. Every institution engages with the themes in what it would see as a fairly distinctive way and I think actually that's a valid view - in other words context is vital, it's come through very clearly from both projects that context is vital. (senior manager)

His colleague echoed this:

It seems to me that, in a way, it's not easy to expect an institution to pick up and run with something just because that happens to be what the QAA have chosen to do in that particular year and that where you get the best engagement is where it fits into something which was an institutional concern anyway, or which is to the fore at that particular time. (senior administrator)

Engagement at the institutional level is dependent, therefore, on a range of factors. What does seem to be emerging is that the recent themes have been far more successful in the extent to which institutions have chosen to engage with them. These themes (The First Year and Research Teaching Linkages) appear to correspond particularly well with concerns that are shared by most, if not all, the diverse range of HEIs within the sector. A vice principal commented on the changes in the strategy for the most recent themes as being more effective in terms of engaging institutions than the initial strategy had been:

So various drivers, various impacts depending on the institution - if the ground is fertile. I think the least helpful thing of all of them is maybe a previous methodology where all institutions agreed that these were good themes for that particular year and we slavishly went along to seminars and came back and moaned about it and slavishly went to the next one and came back and moaned about it and did nothing - because there was no fertile ground to do anything in the institution. So they've been the least successful for us but what we do recognise, because we are looking at the first year about transition and progression, we're delving back into all material there and looking at student needs and so on, so we are going back to them as a resource and engaging post hoc in a sense.

5.1.2 Mechanisms for engagement

Within institutions, there are various institutional structures and systems in place to encourage and support engagement with the themes. Some of these mechanisms, both formal and informal, pre-date the themes, whilst others (such as the appointment of institutional contacts) have arisen as a direct result of the theme programme.

Whilst the vice principals teaching and learning are the initial points of contact for information, the degree to which the themes are taken up throughout the institutions is more likely to be dependent on decisions taken by various internal central committees. Often the main fora for discussion of the themes are central institutional committees such as Learning and Teaching Committees or Academic Quality Committees:

Every time that the Learning and Teaching Committee meets there's a report on QETs and people are much more familiar with the terminology. They know what's going on and they know the range of activities and the resources that they can turn to. There's much greater awareness.

In some HEIs, working groups or networks have developed as a result of various theme activities and these have proved a very effective means of engaging a wider range of staff. For example, in one institution an employability working group has been set up and this is linking the activities of the Employability theme with the Research Teaching Linkages theme. In another institution, a senior manager describes the means by which a particular theme might be used by a working group to inform policy decisions:

There'd probably be a working group set up of people across the institution and people would be encouraged to read those (theme) resources but there'd probably be somebody who'd need to take a lead role in terms of interpreting the results and bringing to the table the key recommendations that would perhaps make a difference with (our institution) – knowing the institutional context. Also an educational development activity might be to hold some sort of event on, say, Integrative Assessment, allowing people to take part in discussions in a wider group, maybe bringing in a speaker to get some debate going that could then feed into the working group or whatever that's developing the policy. There needs to be somebody who's taking that active role or otherwise there is a sense that that information is abandoned on a shelf and not really being engaged with. Working groups can get very focussed in on some nitty-gritty aspects and can forget maybe the big picture, thinking that you can get that from some of these external resources. There would need to be some sort of interpretation mechanism – an active user interpreting it for them in our institutional context.

In at least one institution, there are mechanisms in place that provide direct links from the themes, through the directors of teaching and learning, and are intended to engage staff within departments:

So the structure that we have, I think, is fairly unique - maybe – but it's certainly not typical. What you have around the Quality Enhancement Committee is an opportunity to both staff develop in terms of incoming speakers, have a debate, see the nitty-gritty of what's in this programme - the structure, with every director of learning and teaching around that committee meeting – five or six times a year. I tend to think of them as frameworks that allow particular departments to engage in a way that they may want to interpret particular themes.

Faculty and departmental learning and teaching committees also provide opportunities to inform staff of, and hopefully engage them with, the themes – although, as an associate dean pointed out, not all members of such committees are necessarily committed to promoting themes:

There is a little bit of an element of the kind of 'the usual suspects' in the sense that obviously some people are more interested in these sorts of things than others and I think to some extent, even within the committee structures the people who are on these committees representing their departments, I think in some sense you can get lucky. I think I've been very fortunate in the last year or so that the people on that committee from the department have a genuine interest - it's not just a job that they

have had dumped upon them, as it were, and they're genuinely interested in taking on board some of these ideas and taking them back to their departments and debating it and you see little bits of elements of it embedded as new classes in particular which come up for approval - particularly in light of things like assessment and so on, employability issues. But you can equally find that you occasionally hit members with who it's clearly not their main area of interest and you do wonder about the dissemination of information down the way.

The cyclical Internal Reviews are another mechanism where engagement with the themes is often highlighted. One vice principal was particularly impressed with one recent review:

The themes have been incredibly helpful in terms of just reflective thinking in terms of what departments might do in terms of 'this is the way it is, it might not have to be like this'. It's given a window of opportunity to think. And there is different 'performance' across different departments. So for example one department – we review departments every five years and I've just come from a review of one department in the last few days – I thought the Director of Learning and Teaching gave a tour de force – it was the highlight probably of the two days. What it was, it was an insight of how a department had taken a range of things, re-structured the curriculum, based on thinking both outwith the sector and within the department and there was real engagement in terms of things like assessment and things like the first year experience, things like research teaching linkages and why things are the way they are within this particular curriculum.

ELIR also serves as a means of focussing attention on engagement with the themes. On the basis of senior managers' experience of ELIR review panels so far, it seems to be accepted as perfectly justifiable that institutions themselves decide the extent to which they engage with a particular theme on the basis of its relevance to institutional concerns:

I think in the first round it was certainly 'these are there for you to use and there as a kind of a hook to hang things on and to show how what you are doing in your institution against your priorities is aligned with what are broader issues in Scotland'. I don't think there was any attempt to examine people and say 'show us your first year experience or show us your employability'. But they were quite useful hooks I think for people to bring together some of the enhancements that they were involved with and provide some kind of structures around them. They were a kind of focus you could talk about.

Others felt that the 'default' position expected by ELIR panels was engagement with the themes but did not see this as an unreasonable assumption:

There certainly was a feeling – preparing for ELIR – that we'd got to demonstrate that we *have* engaged. I suppose the theory would be if you have an area that isn't as good as it should be and you haven't actually taken an opportunity to engage, then you do have a bit of accountability there. This is perfectly reasonable. If you're aware of an area that does need to be improved and you've had opportunities to try and take advantage of good practice in other institutions and learn from it and you haven't taken them, then you deserve to be brought to account. (senior manager)

In terms of the second round of ELIRs, some senior managers were slightly less sanguine about the degree of flexibility in expectations of engagement:

I think in the second round there is no more emphasis in the handbook on the fact that you would be examined. I think there might be a little worry around the work that is going on which I don't know enough about yet but I'm going to a meeting on 3 July around the - what is it they are calling it – the indicators of enhancement. I think that there's a little worry in the sector that's they're trying to formalise indicators of enhancement - we may be moving into more of that scenario.

We've got the draft handbook for round two (of ELIR) to comment on but of course in round one, because enhancement themes were new, it was all a bit woolly but if in round two there's a bit more focus on how we are institutionally managing what we do with the enhancement themes, then process being the value takes us to – well, measuring and recording a different set of activities, doesn't it? There's nothing broken and so none of these themes are set up on any kind of premise that self-assessment isn't working or flexible delivery isn't working, these are exploratory topics so the judgements needn't be - shouldn't be - about being above or below some kind of benchmark. It's about enhancement – or how much further does this work allow you to go. And so this should make that easier to achieve - except when the Funding Council gets mithered about evaluation and judgments and all of that. (senior administrator)

Other external mechanisms for supporting and encouraging engagement with the themes include various events such as conferences and workshops provided by the QAA (most notably the annual QE Themes conference) and meetings of the institutional contact. In terms of the annual QAA themes conference, a senior manager (an administrator in this case) made the point that:

Our reaction to that is it's an excellent event but I've been every year except this year and you always see the same faces and it does become part of the circuit now for people like us as opposed to something for academics ...and I don't know how we get around that one.

Her colleague agreed that the conference 'struggled to get beyond the usual suspects of the representatives of Directors of Quality or Ed Dev people'.

One senior manager was aware of this criticism that it is often 'the usual suspects' who attend such events and so had made a determined effort to encourage wider participation:

So as the themes have gone on and because of the way the themes have changed I think we've probably put a little bit more emphasis on that in terms of trying to get different people involved across the institution in engaging and attending the events as they happen and engaging in debate.

Other institutions had organised events themselves to showcase the themes and encourage greater engagement.

We now turn to the issue of what 'institutional engagement' means in terms of who is engaged with the themes within institutions. As we noted above, senior managers in institutions are the initial point of contact for the themes and, as such, are largely responsible for ensuring that the themes are 'passed down' to those within their institution who are best placed to take them forward. In addition to these senior

managers, the directors of teaching and learning and the institutional contacts play a key role in promoting the themes.

5.1.3 Forms of engagement

In a conclusion to our Final Report of the QEF, we noted that 'whilst it would be over-optimistic to claim that all stakeholder groups are working together in perfect harmony to embed the Framework, reactions to the QEF have been encouragingly positive'. This remains true for the QE themes. In terms of where engagement is strongest, there are pockets of awareness certainly, if not active engagement, within most stakeholder groups. To return to the forms of impact model¹, we can use this model to characterise forms of engagement of the various stakeholders:

Table 2: Forms of engagement with the themes

Form of engagement	Brief description	Applicability to various stakeholder groups
1. No Awareness		Possibly some practitioners and probably most students
2. Awareness	Initial awareness of potential policy changes	Some practitioners and some student representatives
3. Informational	Emerging awareness and interest in knowing more, thinking of implications for the institution	Some practitioners HODs Many student representatives
4. Institutional/ personal	Begins to analyse effects and impacts on existing systems and practice	Deans.
5. Management	Attention on difficulties in the processes and tasks involved in developing new practices, processes and systems	Directors of Learning and Teaching Learning & Teaching staff and Quality Officers Student Representatives beginning to assess implications of their participation
6. Consequence	Attention on impact on students, staff, departments and whole institution of new practices and processes, relevance, evaluation and implied changes	Senior institutional managers (particularly the VPs Learning & Teaching) Learning & Teaching staff and Quality Officers Institutional contacts Directors of Teaching and Learning Associate Deans Teaching and Learning Student Representatives (particularly sabbatical officers)
7. Collaboration	Coordinating and cooperating with other stakeholders in using new practices, systems and processes	Senior institutional managers (particularly the VPs Learning & Teaching) Directors of Teaching and Learning Learning & Teaching staff and Quality Officers Some Institutional contacts Student representatives (particularly sabbatical officers)
8. Refocusing	Attention now on adaptation, major changes, alternatives to original ideas, creativity	The SFC and QAA have introduced the QE themes to bring about major changes in the approach to quality in Scottish higher education and to encourage innovation in teaching and learning.

As we said in the QEF evaluation report, only in the loosest sense is this framework hierarchical because individuals may be involved in several forms of engagement simultaneously. It can be used to map stakeholders' engagement with the themes in a very broad sense as there are clearly those within each stakeholder group who are far more familiar with the themes and actively engaged in various ways than others.

¹ See page 7 of this report

Also, stakeholders in some institutions are far more engaged with the themes than their counterparts in other institutions² and, furthermore, there will be stronger engagement with certain themes within institutions than with others and, in those cases, possibly different stakeholder groups engaged.

In very general terms, there still appears to be a barrier for particular stakeholders (middle managers) in moving beyond the informational stage (3)³ to the institutional/personal stage (4). To some extent, this issue is being addressed by the influence of the associate deans teaching and learning and the directors of teaching and learning (or their equivalents) but there is room for improvement in many institutions in the degree of engagement with the themes of heads of schools and heads of departments. Interestingly, compared to our experience of the themes during the previous QEF evaluation, engagement with the themes is now more far more widespread amongst the various stakeholder groups across institutions. Whereas previously the main point of contact for the themes would be a Quality Director or equivalent, responsibility (and engagement) appears to be now far more devolved. This point was picked up by a practitioner who had been involved in one of the theme projects:

It's tended to be the programme teams that implemented Employability, Responding to Student Needs or the First year experience and it wasn't one person within a school. And I think devolving it down to the programme teams helps engagement with the staff – they tend to see it down at their subject level and there are ways that they can input.

With the proviso that this is a fairly 'broad sweep' picture of a complex pattern of engagement at the sectoral level, the following provides some examples to illustrate how each of the stakeholder groups tend to engage with the themes.

Senior managers

As we noted above, senior managers, in particular vice principals teaching and learning, tend to be those who are the initial points of contact for the themes. Not surprisingly, their engagement with the themes is at the strategic level (6) rather than at an operational level. It seems to be the case that as the themes have become more established across the sector over time, in a number of institutions the directors of learning and teaching (or their equivalents) rather than the more senior managers or quality officers, have become the main 'movers and shakers' in terms of influencing institutional engagement with the themes. Two senior managers described this more consultative, collaborative approach involving a wide range of institutional stakeholders rather than just the senior management team:

I think what I like about that is this is not us as a group saying 'I think we should do this (here) because it's a management initiative or because it's a sectoral theme'. It's 'look this is going on at Edinburgh, St Andrews, Dundee – should we think about this? How do we compare?' That's the way I feel I like it to develop as opposed to a top-down thing. I think the structure helps.

² Institutions may wish to map their own engagement against the framework to compare it against this approximate sectoral representation of engagement.

³ The numbers in brackets correspond to the stages represented in the table above.

Once we've interpreted it and said 'we think these are the guidelines for our institution' and the working group have agreed on that, there would be quite a big consultative process of all the departments and all the areas where it would impact. It's important to get everyone's buy-in because if you don't get the buy-in at that stage then it's harder to implement it.

Another senior manager described her involvement with the themes as varying between being quite 'hands-on' and participative to being more facilitative in terms of setting up mechanisms to enable engagement:

I think the other way in which I have been involved personally is by participating in some of the working groups we have set up. So sometimes I participate in the groups and sometimes I just set up the groups and let them get on with the work. So really I suppose my real involvement is really the policy steer and then from the policy steer saying 'what has to happen here? Do we need a working group to develop policies? Do we need a group to say this is how we are going to action the policy? Do we need a dissemination event and where would that be based'? And so that's kind of my own work.

An interesting comment was provided by an institutional contact for the First Year theme at a university where the vice principal was extremely committed to enhancement in the broadest sense and to the themes in particular:

One thing that struck me about the early meetings of the First Year steering group was that I didn't recognise the institutions the other people were coming from because they were going on and on about how you have got to control your senior management, how you've got to make them take notice, how they wouldn't pay any attention to all this work, and so on. I just didn't recognise how it was in that because (our vice principal) is solidly behind things like this. There's a very different atmosphere to what some of them must be in. I really didn't see why they had to go on and on so much about how nobody would pay any attention to this and so on because people do here at senior level.

Directors of Teaching and Learning

As we noted above, the directors of learning and teaching are becoming key influencers in terms of not only how their own schools engage with the themes but also in the extent to which engagement occurs at the institutional level (5):

They are the agents of change. They are effectively heads or deputy heads of school, the head of school would be dealing with finance and HR mainly and then the director of learning and teaching does all the teaching stuff, so they are the people who make changes and if they decide we want to do such and such then it gets rolled out across the whole institution. (Dean)

In each department we've established a post of director of learning and teaching and the idea is that that provides us centrally with a sort of focus either for dissemination or for getting people involved with the enhancement themes. Our strategy at the moment – although this is still to be embedded - in any theme is to try and get a director of learning and teaching or somebody of that ilk to take the lead on a particular theme and maybe take that forward. However, there'll still be a departmental challenge where they are then seen as the enthusiasts or the person

within the department who goes to these events and actually then they have a challenge to then involve their colleagues further. (Dean)

In many institutions these directors meet regularly at committees of which they are members (such as learning and teaching committees), and so they are in a strong position to collaborate by sharing experiences and good practice and so extend their influence of the themes beyond their immediate schools.

Deans

In general, in terms of day-to-day operations within their schools or faculties, most deans take a fairly non-interventionist stance (4) in relation to the themes. One institutional contact summed up the engagement of deans within his particular institution as:

Not so good! Deans tend to be distracted. The deans spend an awful lot of time trying to square various circles and do various impossible tasks. Their ability to focus for very long on any large-scale development like this is pretty limited

However, that is not to say that most deans do not accept overall responsibility for the themes within their remit of taking an overview of their schools or faculties:

The deans are responsible essentially for everything that happens in the faculty. They might not *do* everything but they certainly are responsible for it. So I mean, certainly in my own case, I've been to some of the events which have been put on in relation to launching the themes over the time and to some of the events that have been held here at (our institution). So I'm very much aware of the themes, the themes do feature in discussions within the faculty. I won't say I'm clued up - I'm very much aware. Yes, I won't say the themes are uppermost in my mind all the time, but I am aware.

In terms of information channels, the deans are generally the first port of call for the themes within schools or faculties and they then pass on responsibility to the appropriate staff member (generally the associate, or vice, deans):

Many things come to the faculty through the deans and the deans then speak to the relevant vice dean and that sets things in motion. It can come up the other way but very often things come through deans. In terms of the University the vice deans are all on the Academic Policy Committee so, for example, things might come in through the appropriate deputy principal directly to the vice deans and then come into the faculty that way so that's how it reaches the dean's radar.

The following quote sums up very well the respective roles of the deans and associate deans in relation to the themes and how these two roles are mutually dependent and inter-related:

There has to be the dean very heavily involved in there. Responding to Student Needs is an interesting one as that looks to be all learning and teaching but I don't think it is because one of the things we're engaged in that I've been starting to push through the school, is a whole issue that's about the culture of the school. What is the culture of the school? What are the values of the school? And it's sort of learning and teaching but it stretches a lot beyond that because there's no point just putting in a

set of practices that says what we'll do in terms of responding to student needs – 'we'll do this, we'll have this kind of feedback mechanism this committee, we'll tell the students what we've done' and all the rest of it. It's the culture that sits underneath that. I have to be involved in doing that because you're shifting the whole school into something that we've never done before in that way and therefore there's a whole pile of things that won't happen if it's just a poor associate dean who's just banging their head against lots of staff who are saying 'Oh no, we don't want to be doing this – why are we doing this? It's all right for you, this is your job'. I think the two things have to be there – the two people and the two roles are absolutely critical and if you've got a dean who's not interested, then you're not going to get anything like the fullest impact out of these things.

Associate Deans

The associate deans (or, in some institutions, 'vice deans academic') tend to be more immediately engaged with the themes than do the deans and, in most institutions, have a pivotal role in promoting the themes within their schools or faculties (6). According to one dean, the associate deans 'devise the strategies for engaging with particular themes as and when we can'.

Associate deans position feed up information to senior management as well as filtering it down to middle managers:

It's a sort of a 'hole in the middle', if you like, from the deans down to the associate deans and ensuring that information is disseminated down to the schools. It's a two-way process – there's information going down, there's also gathering of good practice from each of the individual schools and making sure that it's actually embedded within the different programmes. So that's the role that associate deans are trying to perform.

I think basically it's the same for all of us in the sense that we're responsible for teaching and learning across the faculty and we're a point of contact I suppose – receiving information through from high as it were from senior officers in the university or whatever's coming in to the Academic Office and a channel of information through to colleagues - particularly through, I think, the committees that we chair – I sit on Undergraduate Studies committee for example. But we're also then feeding back into the system with annual faculty quality monitoring reports in which we're indicating areas of best practice and things of this sort and what the faculty has been doing. So it's very much about listening to find out what is going on within the various departments and getting that information disseminated that way.

In most institutions active (and explicit) engagement with the themes becomes rather less obvious and consistent below the level of the associate deans – although there are pockets of engagement within stakeholder groups such as institutional contacts and staff working on specific theme-related projects.

Heads of schools and heads of departments

The degree to which heads of schools and heads of departments are engaged with the themes varies considerably between institutions – and, indeed, between schools and department within the same institutions. Some heads of schools tend to know about the themes through teaching and learning committees where they are often

fixed items on agendas but are generally not engaged more directly (3). Other heads of school take a far more proactive stance and regard the themes as, in the words of one head, 'an integral part of my practice and therefore they also form an integral part of the school's practice'. In one of the older universities one head of department saw engagement with one of the themes as of strategic importance in the wider HE context:

Research Teaching Linkages are very important - specifically because there are rumours of moves in the Funding Council to try to save money by moving early year teaching from Higher Education to Further Education and one of the ways in which we offer something which the FE colleges can't, is in research-teaching linkages and therefore we are keen to emphasise the fact that this goes down right into the first year. So that one is something which has been prominent in the radar in the last year - 6 months to a year - and this is one of the main elements we have fed back to the faculty plan.

Heads of schools and departments were the group of staff that were most frequently referred to by others as the least engaged with the themes:

There is pressure for bottom up change but if you don't address the head of school or head of department to think through that change then it won't happen.... I think that is where the themes miss out because there is no engagement in the middle level. There's still not and I think that's because we talk about it but we don't try to fix it. We don't have events about, say, 'we are going to have an enhancement event and it is for heads of department only and if you're not a head of department, then you don't get to go'. (senior administrator)

I think the bit we still don't have is heads of academic departments. They are a very difficult group! We have from time to time one or two (engaged) but they are a very difficult group to get to because they tend to devolve these kinds of things, either to the programme leaders, or to say they're getting taken care of at faculty level and perhaps not to be as engaged themselves with those activities. (senior manager)

The comparatively few heads of schools and departments who contributed to the case studies present a rather more complex set of responses. In general, the will to engage is certainly there – there is no sense of resistance to the themes at all – but pressures of time and workloads are cited as barriers to engagement:

From my point of view as a HoD trying to say 'actually I think the enhancement themes are a good thing, I think it's a better system than we've got south of the border', my problem with it is that they are coming too fast and thick and that they're not having enough time to really, if I was honest, to embed in the processes and systems of a university - the planning cycles and the way colleagues do things, it takes quite a time for those cycles to really work through and I think people start to feel a wee bit swamped.

One programme leader explained (colourfully!) why he had made a point of finding out about the themes:

I was aware of what was going on and my brief was that it was better to be inside the tent p***ing out than outside p***ing in!

Two heads of department made the point (echoed by many other informants during the case study visits) that it was sometimes difficult to isolate their involvement with the themes as, by the time the themes filter down to the departmental level, it is often quite difficult to disentangle actions resulting from the themes from those of other institutional policies:

When I was preparing for this meeting I had actually to look up the Senate Office's website to see what these themes were, so I downloaded and printed this page. I think much as (another HoD) has said, one gets targets, key performance indicators, things we should be looking at - parts of the university strategy, for example, from many different areas and I think in a sense a lot of the unique features of the QE themes get drowned in the noise because we tend to be addressing all these - a lot of these - issues anyway in various ways and after all the other thing about being head of department.....is that a lot of it is reactive - a lot of what we do is actually reacting to the things thrown at us. We don't have a lot of time, or I don't anyway, for strategic thinking in perhaps the way I ought to be or ought to have. So that is I think the way I would sum up the QE themes per se.

The point was made that it is the *effects* of the themes that are important irrespective of whether they, or their staff, know very much about the themes themselves:

I think a lot of this situation may be that at an institutional level individuals or groups are challenged with taking up a particular theme and making sure that the university as a whole is responding to it. The most effective way of promulgating that throughout the university, throughout all the departments, is not necessary to say 'this is theme such and such from the quality enhancement agenda, but this is an issue that we are aware of that's important because - such and such - and this is something that departments and faculties need to focus on'. So the fact that we are largely unconscious or unaware of the existence of these formal quality enhancement themes doesn't mean actually that we are not responding to something, some initiative, which may be partly occurring because of that.

Certainly, at this middle management level engagement with the themes is not as evident as with other stakeholder groups. However, it would be too simplistic to dismiss this as a lack of interest or resistance. Ewart Wooldridge, chief executive of the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education recently emphasised the vital role that middle managers play within their institutions⁴

The truth is that the critical level that makes a difference in an organisation is the quality of the middle managers. In higher education, we are probably not doing enough to equip that level of management for the changes, pressure and competition.

In the light of other pressures and workload, many heads of school and heads of department often simply do not have time to devote to familiarising themselves with the themes in any great detail. However, as they have considerable influence over the extent to which innovations or changes in teaching and learning are embraced, accepted or resisted within their schools and departments, it seems vital that institutions address the issue of how best to ensure that these members of staff fully understand what the themes are trying to do and how they can be assimilated into

⁴ Quoted in THE, 10 July 2008

school and departmental practices rather than the themes being seen as just another burden to be added to already heavy workloads.

Support Staff

In terms of informants for this evaluation, this was an under-represented group and so the picture of the extent of engagement represented here may not be accurate in terms of support staff in general.

In one institution, the director of educational development regarded the themes as:

.....a backbone of our staff development programme since their inception. Our staff development programme is actually very strategically-based against our strategic plan and many of the things in the current and past themes are things that resonate with us anyway so it's allowed us to get a double whammy in – institutional imperative and to say there's this national drive going on as well. Obviously things like assessment are very broad and if that wasn't part of an academic staff development programme, you'd wonder why.

At the institutional level, in the university in which the following informant works there are strong links between the staff development programme and the themes:

If we had a particular event on the First Year Experience, say, then we actually invite – and we actually referee them - workshops and papers as to how people have been impacting that. So we use them as carriers and we might get 30 or 40 offers of contributions in a typical staff conference which isn't necessarily branded as an enhancement theme conference but it's branded on the theme.

In another institution, each member of the educational development unit has responsibility for a particular theme. The director of the unit said that when she takes part in an internal review or a validation she makes a point of asking staff 'how have you engaged with the themes, how useful have they been?'

In very general terms support staff, particularly those with a staff development function, are very much engaged with the themes (6) and these have become an integral part of their staff development programmes.

Institutional contacts

Institutional contacts were not in place at the time of the final evaluation of the QEF and, in most institutions, their introduction appears to have been particularly useful in terms of 'bridging the gap' between external and internal aspects of the current themes. The institutional contacts are involved in two-way exchanges of information and provide a focal point for the themes within their institutions. The quotes from the following institutional contacts are representative of how the role of institutional contact has played out within most institutions:

I go to conferences, I speak to the people, I look at reports on the website, I look at material that comes through and then I feed what I then know into the various different places within the university where it's appropriate to do so. Because of the First Year theme and the way it's supported the university with a certain amount of resource to allow us to do things, I have then been the person who's organised some

of the activities which we've carried out here – a conference, for instance, or a workshop, is that the right word for it? And the outputs of this workshop exploring different aspects of the First Year theme are then fed into the university strategy on induction, retention and so on – all the various things to do with first year students.

I've been going round and talking to the directors of teaching for each of the different schools to find out – using the framework that Ray Land provided – to find what people are doing and what their thoughts are on RTL. And that's been really useful because it's actually started conversation within each of the schools. Prior to actually doing that, I'd attended a number of workshops that the QAA had put on and the institutional contacts meetings and that sort of thing and, as a result, I was getting an insight into the whole issues that surround RTL and then I was able to have that kind of conversation within this – I wouldn't call it an interview process, but that kind of – engagement. Along with that I've also been speaking with the Directors of Teaching and Learning for the colleges and through that we've actually set up half day workshops for staff in those colleges to consider the issues round RTL and things like that. And I've been able to facilitate and guide that and have some conversation.

Institutional contacts have, in general, been very effective in encouraging more widespread engagement with the themes within their institutions. One of the student representatives interviewed referred to the intermediary role of the institutional contacts:

I think the way the themes are working at the moment a lot is because there are representatives in the middle involved at the core. So anything that is going on at the moment at QAA level, you can very easily bring it back here and that is why I think it's worked a lot better in this past 12 months than it has previously because of the fact there's a lot of one-to-one interaction in different schools right across the university as opposed to it being something that the QAA have done - published a report and sent it out, you know.

The first institutional contact quoted below had been particularly successful in engaging a wide range of stakeholders; the second has been particularly successful in engaging practitioners with her theme:

At the meetings of the directors of teaching for the schools, I encourage them to bring along members of staff that they felt were particularly involved in RTL or had something to contribute to the conversation. As such, I think we managed to actually get quite a good cross-section right from people at the vice principal level down to directors of teaching and actual staff on the ground. From that we were encouraged to seek out staff at the coalface, as it were, to come and present at the workshops that we run in colleges.

The institutional teams that we've been encouraged to take along to events as part of the Research Teaching Linkages meetings I think has been very helpful. And we've also had a bit of that with some of the First Year as well – at the last meeting in Edinburgh, we were encouraged to take along an institutional team and that team has then remained when we've come back to the institution and it's been a focus for work.....Within the particular dissemination event I'm thinking about at Edinburgh, there was space within the day for the institutional team with the institutional contact to talk about things and how that might work back (at the institution). So that was really very helpful.

The financial resource available to the institutional contacts, although not a huge amount, has been very welcome in enabling the institutional contacts to, as the following informant puts it, 'oil the wheels':

I'd like to start off here by saying the role of institutional contacts started with the First Year QET and my understanding it was a response to the earlier Lancaster report which indicated there was a general lack of attachment of the outcomes to practitioners. And in that theme we had a lot of discussion – quite forcibly on occasions – regarding that particular issue and I was quite concerned, along with others, about the outcomes not being – not reaching practitioners. And the response was the institutional contact notion - that there *is* someone in the institution who has responsibility and who can report back on what's been done – and that's not a trivial thing because there is a report to write and therefore you feel you have to do something about it. The second, and absolutely vital aspect of this, is that they allowed a certain amount of money to follow with that allowed you to oil the wheels of the mechanism and it's been very helpful. It's been a huge change and has the potential at least to make very large connections between the outcomes of the themes and practitioners.

One of the arguments that we have heard for not encouraging the greater participation of practitioners at themes events is that they are not in the best position of influence to bring about changes – that those who *should* attend are senior or middle managers with the power and authority to effect changes. One of the institutional contacts suggested that it was in this context that the institutional contacts could play a useful role:

I think some are if we're talking about the college Heads of Learning and Teaching, then, yes, they are the ones who are influential – they definitely are. In terms of practitioners or postgraduate tutors – on the face of it, no, but it depends on how they are ready to work with our support and help. It's the individuals within the themes who are really picking it up and running with it. And even those at the practitioner level.... have the interest – the motivation – they know how to work within their own schools to get things done. So I think they *can* be movers and shakers in their own different ways

Her colleague agreed that:

In a sense, you have to hit everybody and ideas do emerge from individuals but they can emerge from the bottom up, I think. If you are willing to take responsibility yourself, the usual thing is, if you have an idea, you get the job!

In order to 'hit everybody', but more especially the 'unconverted', one institutional contact planned to hold faculty workshops for a wide range of staff:

What I'm asking the faculties to do is to identify up to 20 people within the faculty that will work with me in a two hour workshop and that basically we want all the people who are already on side, so there would be about six or seven of them in each faculty, and then a few who are actually resistant to any of the imperatives so they get effectively drawn into it. Even if they don't want to be there, they're effectively drawn into the discussion that is going on so that they can be a part of that.

It would have been interesting to find out how successful this approach had been!

The institutional contacts in another university found themselves in a perhaps more favourable position in that the institution was already very committed to the enhancement agenda ('In our institution we're very forward thinking and I think to that extent it makes our job so much easier – we're pushing at an open door. We're very lucky'). Conversely, however, there were downsides to this as the contacts sometimes came up against the attitudes amongst staff that the themes had nothing new to offer them:

And there was one school I can think of where there was a slight bristling of 'we're doing that anyway'. And we had to say 'we know - but it's come right up the national agenda, it's part of the QAA themes'. So there is a lot of support for it, there is a lot of chat about it. We can use this to our advantage. You know, you're right out there with the people who are doing it and, what is interesting as an institutional contact, is listening to what other people are doing and actually thinking 'we're OK!' There's always a kind of 'but that's what we're doing' but we're needing to point that out to staff.

The introduction of institutional contacts appears to have been very successful as a means of promoting the themes throughout institutions and also of bringing an external perspective into their institutions from their involvement with wider networks of institutional contacts.

Practitioners

In our QEF final evaluation report we noted concern that practitioners were not engaging with the QEF to any significant extent and we suggested that, as with so many practices in higher education, more may be happening than is being made explicit. Although, in the words of one informant to that evaluation, there are no doubt pockets of practitioners 'where the sun will never shine', we intimated that the influence of, for example, the quality enhancement themes might be far more widespread at the grassroots level than is assumed. This certainly appears to be the case on the evidence of this evaluation of the QE themes. Whilst many practitioners still tend to have little awareness of the themes *per se*, this is not to say that they are not engaged, albeit unconsciously in many cases, with the way in which the themes are played out within their institution and so the lack of more than a superficial awareness of the themes (2) need not be interpreted negatively:

I think as long as the effects are trickling down they don't need to know it's an enhancement theme. What they need to know is 'I want to improve my teaching, I want to improve my students' learning. I want to improve my assessment processes' and they don't need to know where the information and the evidence has come from. They just need to know what has worked and what evidence do we have that that has worked and can I apply it to my own teaching? That's what they need to know.

If you ask any of the staff other than me in (my subject area) about the enhancement themes, I'm pretty sure you'll get much of a blank but you'd get some comments on a lot of these topics - simply because it's sort of dissipated. There are a few people in the know and the actual explicit knowledge of the themes will dissipate as you down through the staff - which is not to say that we are not trying to act on these.

A hopeful note regarding the wider involvement of practitioners was sounded by an institutional contact in one of the older and more research-intensive universities:

It's like a game of two halves. There's half who really want to be involved in the game, and there's half who really don't want to be involved in the game, and that makes it quite tricky but what's nice is every now and then some of the 'really don't want to be involved' get pushed by their peers into at least acknowledging that it's something that they have to be aware of.

The two most recent themes were referred to as being particularly successful in involving practitioners more directly:

I suspect more recent engagement has come in a way which we're quite comfortable with, I suspect, from solely being the domain of senior managers. And I think the engagement in Research Teaching and the First Year in terms of the internal picture probably is much more practitioner-based. We still have these (senior manager) people endorsing, agreeing that the theme is a good thing but we've spread to touch more of those teachers - those practitioners - in recent times.

I think the Research Teaching Linkages has actually proved to be one that has caught the attention of practitioners because they have said 'finally these people are talking about something which is actually at the core of what we do. What are these attributes that we think university level learning gives'? And actually I think that has a potential to be a very strong theme because it is actually getting to the core of what are we about and that's what they are interested in.

Those practitioners who are aware of the themes and have an interest in, for example, attending a particular conference or workshop are often prevented from attending by lack of time. Those who stand to gain most benefit from theme events (those at the 'chalkface') are, therefore, most often the ones least likely to be able to attend:

I've been here since about 1990 – and in the first few years I was here when you see an event like this coming up, you might fairly casually say 'okay I could probably go to that. I will reshuffle a few things, I may even have to cancel a lecture, there is flexibility in my workload to do it'. *Now* that is not true, *not true*. I have been up to my eyes, but the thing is when I look around at my colleagues and especially the engaged colleagues, this is the usual suspects issue – they are all working their socks off, frankly. I sometimes look four or five weeks ahead and someone says 'can you come on this day' and I know already I can't. It's impossible. It's like looking at days that are already double-booked, you know what I mean, and I am already juggling. So the slightly more relaxed pace of academic life has just disappeared – that's gone, long gone. So when people look at days like this they are kind of looking for something that is either really pretty sharply engaged with what they are doing or at a time of year when it is easy to go, and those times of year are shrinking - the islands are shrinking.

Those practitioners who *had* found (or, more accurately, been given) time to attend theme events were, in general, highly positive about the experience:

The main thing I took from that First Year theme (event), which I actually really enjoyed, was the fact that we seemed to be doing a lot of the things which were being suggested in the first place so it was great to have that confirmation that we were doing things right, and we certainly haven't had a problem with retention in (my subject area), not at first year, for some years, because we used to have a very bad

problem with that but we have addressed that. We seem to have stumbled upon many of the right strategies, but there were nevertheless some other examples that came out of that First Year theme that we were able to implement.

With the workshops and conferences, it's been great to just hear about the experiences from other areas or fields or universities, and I realised that you're not actually on your own – you're the only person that's dealing with an issue, there's lots of other people there. And it's getting a chance to get your head above the parapet and be able to engage in that conversation whether it's just within your own institution or with others.

However, a senior manager voiced the view that it was perhaps beneficial to target more carefully who went to such events to maximise the impact:

Most of these people are not in a position to effect any change so it is just a grand day out and nice lunch and learn a few things and it is good. It is important that you have these things, I am not suggesting you shouldn't, but it doesn't make institutional change.

Another possible barrier to the greater (conscious) engagement of practitioners, particularly in the older universities but increasingly across all HEIs, is the (probably accurate) perception that a higher status is attached to research compared with teaching:

And we're still living with the fact that even sort of post-RAE a huge proportion of the staff at the university don't regard themselves primarily as teachers and will engage with it only minimally - as much as they need to do. They regard it as a status type thing – a kind of requirement - rather than a maximum requirement. The university itself, although there has been some promising practical developments through the last couple of promotion rounds, it's still the case that the kind of attitude to teaching is that if you really can't hack it as a researcher, you might as well be a teacher. With this environment, it's extremely difficult to get people to engage with development. The thing that surprises me often is how many people are prepared to (engage with teaching) despite that because there's not much positive outcome to it.

An issue which some practitioners referred to was the importance to them of events geared towards their own subject areas. Some mentioned that events organised by the HEA Subject Centres were more relevant to them than the more generic theme events.

Not surprisingly, engagement with themes is strongest when a particular theme reflects practitioners' areas of interest:

I think you will find that people engage with these themes on a selective basis, reflective of issues that they feel are relevant to their area of activity. So I think there is a bit of smorgasbord approach which is that people dip in and dip out depending upon their needs at the time and that's what we do.

In a slightly different category in terms of engagement with the themes are those practitioners who have taken part in theme projects. This has certainly provided staff with a much deeper insight into the rationale and operation of the themes. Attendance at events such as theme steering group meetings and other theme

events provided project staff with opportunities to gain a much more informed knowledge of how themes were being played out across the sector and to feed this back into their own institutions:

I think you bring back from the discussions at the meetings and from your involvement in the various particular QET events, because you tend to be a better attender I think than the average person, a knowledge of the particular topic that has been discussed that has arisen out of the discussions and it depends on the individual and depends on the circumstances and the timing. You have opportunities to discuss with people - you highlight various things to people, you suggest people get in touch with other people, so there are benefits I think from that engagement.

Engagement with the themes by practitioners is undoubtedly taking place but, in many cases, it would seem that practitioners may still be unaware that activities they are taking part in have arisen from the themes. This can be interpreted as a positive indication that themes are becoming so closely embedded with institutional strategies that it is difficult to disentangle the two processes – and, indeed, this poses a problem for evaluating the specific impact of the themes.

*Students*⁵

Encouragingly, we noted that in some institutions there has been a quite dramatic increase in the number of student representatives being trained, largely by sparqs, since our previous evaluation of this aspect of the themes. This is generally interpreted as a positive indication that more students are keen to be involved in enhancement activities. One practitioner however, sounded a note of caution that others have also voiced:

Students representatives by their very nature are different and tend not to take a view which is, if you wish, a professional view or professional approach, but a rather more individual approach. They came from a political background. They have a different kind of agenda.

At the national level, sparqs has been instrumental in training student reps and were frequently praised by students, and others, for their contribution. A newer organisation that was referred to as beginning to have a positive effect in terms of student engagement with the enhancement agenda is SLEEC (Student Learning Enhancement and Engagement Committee). A student representative felt that, in his words, SLEEC had great potential as a means of bridging the gap between QAA and the students associations. He felt that potentially SLEEC could play an important role in the development of the themes:

Where I think SLEEC could make student unions, student officers more effective is actually right at the beginning and helping to set what themes should be, because I don't think you can really have student engagement if it's coming from the QAA and saying like 'this is the theme, now engage'. I think it needs to almost come from, dare I say, grass roots, saying 'these are the issues, this is what we want themes to

⁵ The student views represented here come from sabbatical student officers as the most likely to have an informed view on the themes. With hindsight, had time allowed, it would have been useful to have counterbalanced the views of these already involved students by talking to some 'ordinary' students about their views on enhancement.

attract', and set it from that point of view, and I think that's where SLEEC can really come in.

A student association president also referred to the potential of SLEEC to represent the views and contribution to the themes of the wider student body:

I think that's the benefit of SLEEC in terms of getting students involved and really making the whole quality enhancement process an accessible one because essentially if we are going to be making things better then we should be asking the students how to make it better and get them engaged in the process rather than a bunch of academics and teaching staff sitting around a table coming up with ideas.

In most (probably all) institutions, there are student representatives on all the major committees where learning and teaching issues are discussed – although the experience of students varied as to the value attached to the student viewpoint:

You will find people in the university who are genuinely chuffed that you are there and really value your input and will ask you a lot of questions and will single you specifically out to find out what students think. But then you also get people who don't quite understand what we're there for and they don't encourage us to really participate, so you can get it both ways. I would say the majority of the time it is somebody that really likes you to be in there and does really want to know what you have to offer and is very respectful of what you have to offer.

The views of 'rank and file' students are filtered through the class representatives up to student executive members and then to the relevant institutional committees. In terms of the themes, students are often members of theme working groups within institutions as well as being represented on the steering groups for the themes at the national level. A number of the student officers interviewed also said that they, or other student representatives, had attended various theme events – such as the annual QAA themes conference – and these had been very useful in raising their understanding of the themes.

In terms of students in general, most student officers felt that there was very little awareness of the themes (1):

I think if you spoke to most students here and you said 'quality, what does it mean to you?', they would have an idea but in terms of the actual themes and what they are, I think you'd be looking at class reps.

However, as with practitioners, the point was made that this might not really be an issue that needed to be a source of concern:

I don't honestly think students need to know about the enhancement themes to a great degree or need to know what's going on. They need to see the changes that are being made. How the university goes about making these changes, to most undergraduates or post-graduates I personally feel is largely irrelevant but the fact that the uni is looking at making these changes, is what's important. Myself and my Committee are very much aware of them, but outside of that I think we took a very conscious decision that we are not going to talk about these issues to students but were going to translate them into actions and what's going on. And I think that's much more powerful to the students than the fact that you've attended a hundred

meetings on this but if you sit there and say 'these are the changes they've made', irregardless of the reasons behind, if they are good changes, the students will feel much more strongly and part of the process.

As a sabbatical officer I would love for every student in the University to be fully engaged and fully aware of what's going on in the sector, but in reality that's not going to happen, not everyone cares, to be honest, so long as the standard of their education is what they expect it to be.

A practitioner felt that the barriers to greater engagement of students were similar to those affecting practitioners:

They won't participate – actually they have become like staff in a way, that their time is so pressured. The fact that many of them have got jobs, that the idea of coming along to an optional session – if it's optional that means you don't have to go so they don't, you know what I mean?

A sabbatical officer made a similar point:

There's also increasingly much greater demands on students and students' time in terms of the numbers that are now working part-time, even full-time, in a number of cases, and we're finding that students aren't engaging with their own student union. Our elections are much less contested these days than they used to be even two or three years ago, and what we need to be looking at in institutions is, is that because they don't have time to do it, because they're not interested in doing it, or is it because they're so disengaged from it that they don't think it will make any difference?

According to a student officer, students need to realise that they will be listened to and their views taken into account. This is not always appreciated by students – particularly when they first come to university:

I think students a lot of the time come from school with a mind-set that 'this is how it is, this what you do' and getting it into their heads in the first month 'in actual fact, you are a student at university, you *will* be listened to, we take your opinions very seriously and *will* act on them'. I think getting that idea across - I think it's almost getting around the mind-set. I think there could be a lot more done in the first year especially, throughout the first year, of really building that up and as we start to re-structure the class representation system really put importance on that and really give the students the opportunity to really feel as though they are getting feedback on the issues that they are raising. It's one thing for students to raise issues and raise concerns but to actually get feedback on them directly would help.

A student officer offered some advice to QAA on how they might play a part in encouraging more students to take an interest in the themes:

I think QAA needs to put quite a lot of thought into where they could get your average student involved and how they could perhaps make the theme publications or the literature a little more user friendly for the students to understand that they're actually about them. The QAA can't be responsible for talking to every student - that comes down to perhaps having a format and literature that is accessible to students and they can disseminate it to their membership rather than the QAA doing that.

Similarly, the following informant feels that the themes are not 'speaking' at all to the 'average' student:

I don't think it speaks true to the average student in any way, shape or form. I'm not saying you have to throw it down their necks, but you almost need more marketing and promotion. It's the same thing as almost NUS in a lot of ways in that the average student will still associate NUS with their Topshop discount!

He went on to say:

I think it's definitely right that people like myself are involved in the whole process as well as obviously the correct higher-end management people in the university are very much involved in it. But I think the missing ingredient is the fact that for a lot of students the first time I say to them 'the First Year experience' is the first time they ever hear it. Now from every kind of marketing there is out there, whether it is an audio advert on the television, there is always a pre-emptive awareness before the push and I think that's what's missing from the themes. I think it's fine to kind of let people know about the kind of themes in their induction process, telling them about the kind of things and why these themes have been picked and I think it's most important to do that but I think there almost needs to be a more broader awareness of the brand of even the QAA and then what these themes are and what they will do.

Other student informants made a similar point – that the themes were not couched in language with which students were familiar or comfortable:

If you were to go and say to a student 'first year experience', they wouldn't really know, but if you were to talk to them about it, they would understand what you meant. I think they know it – they know about the themes, but they don't know that they are enhancement themes and that they are here from the QAA and the university engages with them.

I got told off for describing the 'dark art of quality'. There's a group in NUS and we're called the quality geeks because we're the ones who can speak the language and other officers come to us asking us to translate. People are having to come to other student officers to get stuff translated and we end up providing unofficial support to the FE sector because the problems we have here are worse than the FE because they're usually one officer, here we have six. So there's bits and pieces shared. So what we are finding is it's things like translation, the use of language in it is not hugely accessible.

I think we need to have confidence in our students, that they can understand these issues, they do have valuable contributions to make, but we have to also accept that we can't go in to talk to students about quality enhancement themes, quality assurance, using that terminology they're unfamiliar with.

This same informant made the point that:

sparqs training now doesn't use the word quality once. When they do their basic course rep training, because they find students instantly have no idea what's going on and they lose interest. So, yes, they don't use the word quality - at all.

One informant mentioned an idea that had emerged from a themes conference that as well as there being a staff institutional contact for the themes, there should be a

student institutional contact. The academic institutional contact and the student institutional contact would work together to create an agenda for both students and staff. This might prove a useful mechanism to encourage greater engagement of student in the themes if the idea is taken up.

5.1.4 Conclusions

To summarise, 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.

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.

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.

In conclusion to this section, we end with a quote that sums up the need for commitment to the themes to come not just from senior managers or from practitioners 'on the ground' but for all institutional stakeholders to be engaged to varying degrees in order to ensure that the themes have the necessary impact within institutions:

I don't think you can identify key people, I think it's got to be multi-level. You've got to have the practitioners on board, obviously, because they're the ones who are dealing with the students day to day, but unless the structures are in place, unless it seems institutionally important, and that it's recognised from up above, it's not going to work either. It's got to be aligned at all levels or there could be pockets and it would still happen. That's certainly not the case here but say, for example, people at the top were not interested in the First Year experience, there will be a group of people who were teaching who would say, 'well actually this is really important', but you wouldn't get the same breadth of engagement. If somebody at the top is saying 'this is really important and we need to have this, this and this in place', and then the people down there are doing it as well, that's going to be much more effective. Just to isolate one group of people I think is dangerous.

In many institutions, enhancement is not seen in terms of the need to concentrate efforts on improving, for instance, induction policies or progression rates but in the much wider sense of bringing about an institutional shift in quality culture. The themes clearly have a major contribution to make to this long-term objective but, as a number of informants emphasised, they need to be seen in the context of an holistic approach that takes into account and makes use of all the dimensions of the quality enhancement strategy:

The outstanding thing that's come to mind and I've become aware of during the last two years, is the need to take a holistic approach, both in terms of students and staff, and I think that's where we're really in a sense falling down - there's a tendency to say this wee bit stands here and that wee bit stands there but actually issues about retention, issues about staff engagement, student engagement - we're going to have to think of ways of taking an holistic approach and dealing with students and staff as a whole because there's a culture that really needs to be addressed. (institutional contact)

We return to this important issue of 'bringing it all together' in the concluding section of this report.

5.2 The impact of the themes

We now come to the most important section of this report and to the focus of this evaluation – the impact of the themes. A reasonable question might be "what impact has the Quality Enhancement themes had?" By adopting our particular methodological stance, in which there may be unanticipated outcomes and unpredictable adaptations of the strategy, we understand the idea of the impact of

the themes strategy more in terms of its *effects*. This releases the evaluation to look for the widest range of responses to the strategy from which the audiences of the evaluation can draw inferences.

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. It is beyond the scope of this evaluation to look in detail at the impact of each of the themes but it would make little sense to provide informants' comments outside the context of particular themes.

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. SHEEC has recently revised its strategy for supporting engagement with the themes and for promoting the outcomes of theme activity. This strategy is based on a move away from the themes being taken forward by SHEEC as a series of projects and workshops to theme activity taking place in a number of contexts. The strategy incorporates a much greater focus on institutional activities and on cross-sector sharing of good practice. The First Year and Research Teaching Linkages Themes reflect these changes to the strategy. These changes may also be a significant factor in bringing about the greater engagement and degree of interest with the current themes.

Many references were made to the approachability of both SFC and QAA and their willingness to listen to, and respond to, the views of the sector. For example one of the institutional contacts said:

A fascinating aspect of our engagement with the themes as far as I see over five years or so is they continue to evolve and they are dynamic structures and that is the way that the QAA have treated them. At times you find that frustrating because you don't know the ground on which you stand but on the other side of the coin, they've been able to introduce these innovations and changes to cope with differences. So I think that's positive – on balance, it's a positive thing. And, as we know, it's almost a world-leading thing so there's no model for them to follow. They are listening to us and you hear they are listening to us. It doesn't always come out as the design that you would think about but, on reflection, we've certainly been able to use this particular innovation. We're great supporters of this concept and the themes in general.

Of the earlier themes, a number of informants referred to Assessment and Employability as having been 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 and of which a number of informants claimed to have little awareness. Looking at informants' perceptions of why these themes have had such varying

degrees of impact – and, in particular, looking at how aspects of the present strategy for the themes appears to be maximising interest and awareness of the themes, helps to illustrate some of the factors that appear to maximise impact.

As we indicated earlier in this report, there are methodological challenges in evaluating impact. There was almost universal agreement that the themes had created a climate of debate around key issues and so it seems reasonable to assume that a body of knowledge around theme issues has been steadily building up amongst institutional stakeholders. However, the extent to which this knowledge has actually influenced practice is hard to assess because of the difficulty of disentangling the impact of the themes from the wide variety of other influences within institutions. Another point to note is that this is a ‘state of play’ depiction of impact – it was pointed out by many informants that impact of many of the actions resulting from one or other of the themes may not be evident for some time yet as changes are notoriously slow to take effect in higher education. With those provisos in mind, the perceptions and experiences of the wide range of stakeholders interviewed during the course of the evaluation provide a comprehensive, although necessarily subjective, account of the impact of the themes on teaching and learning.

5.2.1 Factors affecting impact

Any educational intervention, takes time to ‘bed down’ within systems and the early enhancement themes went through the inevitable teething stages as they were in the vanguard of a highly innovative approach to quality enhancement. Mistakes were no doubt made but lessons have been learned and the changes to the managerial and operational strategy reflected in the QAA’s five year rolling plan address a number of the criticisms of these early themes that came from the sector.

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 being able to address 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 disincentive to engagement. 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 were 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, flexible programme of themes. For example, the present two themes, whilst running concurrently, have different start and completion dates.

Related to the timing of the themes but a different issue to the timescale of the themes, is that of timeliness. As we mentioned above, timeliness is a significant factor in terms of the impact of a particular theme. 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:

We didn't engage with Flexible Delivery, it wasn't on our agenda. Now it is, so we are now delving back into all that material that has already been generated because now we have the motivation to engage with it which is not just about flexible delivery, it is also about student experience and first year but also we're teaming it with mobile technology. So we are using mobile technology to drive flexibility and using the key principles that have been developed in material there. So we now have a motivation and an institutional and policy reason to engage. (senior manager)

The impact of re-visiting these 'past'⁶ themes will not be evident for some time and so looking for impact even at this stage of two years from the completion date of, for example, Flexible Delivery may be premature.

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. This criticism arose far less frequently during the course of this evaluation of the themes. There is a general acknowledgement that the themes link very well with current developments within the sector and most have been relevant and useful in helping institutions to address priorities.

Another issue related to ownership is the greater extent to which institutions themselves are now directly involved with the themes compared to the rather more passive role they played within the earlier themes:

The Responding to Student Needs and the first Assessment one worked in a very different way. It tended to be the steering committee getting material together and then writing reports, so there was less direct involvement with institutions. That began to change with the Employability one. I think the project way of doing the First Year and the Research Teaching Linkages is one that certainly suits the way we look at things. (senior administrator)

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 sector priorities as they were selected by their institutional representatives on SHEEC with that in mind:

Why did QAA have the First Year theme? It might have been because a lot of people like us said when asked 'what sort of themes do you think we should be dealing with?' we probably said 'well, we're doing an awful lot with first year at the moment –

⁶ In a sense there are no 'past' themes as the issues themes cover are very much ever-present concerns for most institutions.

we clearly see that as a really important thing that we're doing – so let's have a theme on it'. It works in both directions. (institutional contact)

Another innovation that has had considerable impact in terms of supporting and promoting the themes at an institutional level is the appointment of the institutional contacts. Having two points of contact, one for each of the current themes, within each institution further strengthens the sense that themes have a 'home' within the institutions rather than being 'owned' by the regulatory bodies.

Incentives

As many comments reveal, 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:

We got a small pot of money from the First Year theme and there were discussions in the working group about what we could do with the small pot of money. And we decided we would pass it out to staff in a first year award scheme - a small tightly-bound first year award scheme where staff could bid for up to £500 of this pot of money if they had an idea or an enhancement activity which they wished to be placed in the first year. And that would probably not have happened, in fact almost certainly would not have happened, if hadn't have been for the funding and the stimulus of the theme. The interesting thing about that in terms of commitment, institutional commitment, is that I think the funding was £2K and those projects probably cost us £4K so if you like it was 50/50 and actually once we began to have the idea, we then thought well actually we've got 21 applications and we could only fund 7, one of which we funded in a different way through staff time which cost us significantly more. (dean)

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:

I think the other factor that made that made that one (Employability) become policy was the follow through from the Funding Council of the four years of grants. Very, very significant motivator for an institution for all the right reasons and that has really seen that Employability has been central to the framework. It's there, it's part of our action planning every year and we know where we are accountable back. But outwith the accountability, we know we've got some resource that had come with this to make it happen in a sense. And make it happen in quite a concentrated way because four years is not a long time in higher education where you are turning round an institution. So that one I think has been the one where there has been the most significant impact. (vice principal)

I am not a great fan of pushing lots of money into institutions but I think that the decision to push a small amount of money into every institution has been a great one and I think that really has stimulated much more change and potentially greater impact for such a small return. (educational developer)

Although this point is also relevant to 'ownership' of the themes by the sector, one informant made the point that the external origin of the themes, rather than being

seen negatively was a definite advantage and an incentive to engagement within his institution:

For an institution like this, I think it is always very useful to have some external reference point where it is not coming from an internal P-VC or director of research or director of learning and teaching. Our staff actually tend to respond very positively to things that are external - an external theme or external speaker. Sometimes that distance can be extremely useful. (Institutional contact)

This context sets the scene for the next substantive section of this report which looks at the ways in which the themes have had an impact within institutions.

5.2.2 Forms of impact

In this section we address the key issue at the heart of this evaluation – the impact that the themes have had. Some forms of impact are more tangible than others and can be clearly identifiable by informants – for example, 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

As we noted above, evaluating impact within the short-term and post-hoc constraints of this evaluation presents some considerable challenges. Many informants would agree with the following informants:

It's actually really hard to pick out how the specific themes are affecting specific things that we are doing and you will find that you get half a dozen different members of the university staff all doing very similar things but each of them will give you a different explanation for why. Some of them would mention QE themes and some of them wouldn't, so it's really hard to pick out. (senior lecturer)

If you're asking if Activity A only happened because of Theme B, which has then led to an enhancement that the student sees, then the answer to this is I probably can't show that exactly. If you're asking in what way is the student experience better now than it was, say, five years ago, I think there's a whole raft of ways in which it's better. (institutional contact)

An associate dean in an institution where there had been considerable engagement with many of the themes could 'feel' the impact in terms of a general enhancement 'culture' but would find it extremely difficult to pinpoint specific links to the themes:

Rather than a policing, it's a self-evaluation and I think the whole ethos round about it has been positive. It's a much more positive way of approaching the whole teaching and learning experience. Rather than saying 'are you ticking these boxes?', it's 'here's a new theme, try this, try that and how does it work'? So I think from the whole teaching perspective, I think it's very positive. Impact on individual students? Difficult to say. I think our employability figures indicate that there is something going

on there - the direction of travel's correct. I think it's difficult to point to *that* student and *that* programme at *that* time as having a direct impact but I think the direction of travel is good. (associate dean)

A number of references were made to the fact that the themes had served to make explicit many activities that were already taking place:

I feel they've helped by making it all more explicit. There are so many things – especially PDP – that implicitly we do. We do reflection, we do personal development, we do goal-setting and that sort of thing and the enhancement theme helps to make that more explicit because when we're training the staff, we'll refer them to the enhancement theme's website or to the QAA website to try and give them as much background to it all and give them as much support as we can. (practitioner involved in a theme project)

I think also the themes are a catalyst for sharing good practice. If the theme wasn't there, I should say you tend to do these things anyway but you don't particularly think about things. It's an opportunity to go into more depth as to why you're doing it and to try and get the best – and share the best – practice and optimise what you're doing. (practitioner)

Even where it was difficult to isolate the contributions of themes to institutional developments, the themes were certainly seen as adding value to what was already going on. The following member of a Centre for Teaching and learning who is part of the PDP (First Year theme) project said:

It's difficult to tease out what are the connections with the theme and locally what's happening here as we have a strategic push to introduce PDP for all undergraduate students. The enhancement theme has informed that and the project's informed it because I've been part of it. But actually I suspect that probably what we are doing here would have happened in much the same way anyway whether that project had happened or not. That sounds very negative but it's not negative at all, it's just we were task-focussed.

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:

PDP was one of the things that would have probably gone on the same way without the theme, it may well have done. But, for example, three years ago we were holding discussions about where we should start introducing PDP to students and the third year was seen as where to target because of the proximity to employment....but in actual fact we've introduced PDP to first years ..and quite possibly because there's been a lot of talk about the First Year experience because of the theme, but it's hard to say it might not have happened anyway because of good reasons either way. (institutional contact)

Others confirmed the extra momentum that the themes brought to on-going activities:

I think there is the issue of momentum and the fact that having the theme provides an almost constant driver there that maintains momentum and also the fact that there are specific people who have responsibility to engage with those things – again they are there to maintain that momentum because I know if I suddenly just stop doing

anything to do with the first year, momentum would slow down. It would, necessarily, because people would use their time elsewhere and other things would start to encroach whereas, at the moment, because we're pushing forwards with these things, people are making the time, in many cases, it's their own time, I have to say as well, to make these things happen. (institutional contact)

The advantage of the Research Teaching link, it offers a new – well, not 'new' but a slightly different - peg on which to hang a whole lot of conversations that you're already having and I think for us it's been very very good to have that particular theme. It's been a very useful theme and it's been at a time when staff are prepared to talk about it. It's also been very much not a big stick, if you know what I mean, it's been very much a celebration of what's going on and how can we take this forward and where are we going from here. (institutional contact)

During the interviews, informants were asked whether there had been any unintended or unanticipated outcomes of the themes as often in educational interventions these prove to be sometimes as significant in terms of effect as the planned outcomes. However, in the case of the themes, very few examples were mentioned. The responses of the following informants are typical of the responses to this question:

None that come immediately to mind. They are fairly open. I mean they are not prescriptive so in a way most things are sort of not planned for but I really can't think of anything on that. (senior manager)

I don't know that the outcomes were actually that anticipated. I think that you're at a table with all these institutions, you have a whole load of outcomes related to the sector rather than perhaps how you expect them to pan out within your own institution. And I think the idea that your project doesn't end up the way that you intended is quite normal!

The problem of distinguishing the impact of the themes from other institutional developments was highlighted earlier in this report and the evidence reported above appears to largely confirm this. However, there *are* forms of impact – some tangible, others less so – which informants felt could be traced directly to the influence of various themes. In the rest of this section we provide examples of some of these visible, and other slightly less easily discernible, effects.

'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. In the light of comments from informants on the length of time it takes to fully realise the impact of themes within institutions, this is very encouraging as this theme is, at the time of writing, still a 'live' theme:

I think the First Year theme has been really interesting for me and I think that the work has highlighted a number of issues – whether it's just been because people are speaking about the first year. I think a lot of the outcomes from that (university working group) are really going to impact and are already starting to impact on

students in things like, I suppose maybe really specifically, to retention. And what it's done for me is that it's got people actually speaking about what it's like to be in the first year and I think that's excellent because the first year is scary and there is a balance to be struck between 'this is a university and you have to be kind of confident and work hard but you can also be supported along the way'. So it's just been excellent to have that kind of attitude. (student officer)

Another specific example of change which was identified as a direct result of the First Year theme was the exploration of the concept of informal learning spaces:

Out of the First Year, one of the College Heads of Learning and Teaching put forward a proposal to our Learning and Teaching Committee to make greater use of informal learning spaces for students – to have a look around the university and see what we could identify and use as an informal learning space. It would be badged in that way. Students would know it was there, staff would know it was there. And that came quite clearly out of one of the First Year events that we attended – so you could identify that. (institutional contact)

In one of the smaller institutions, the Employability theme had led to quite significant developments:

Employability we are very successful with. I don't think it would have necessarily happened anyway, it's been a conscious and directed effort to look at employability and to make huge and explicit efforts to the point where it comes to our executive group on a regular basis. We now have one of our heads of school who has the direct responsibility for employability as a theme and I think very good connections with employers and with the outside world. I think that has probably been our biggest success story. (institutional contact)

Where institutions were going through any kind of curricular re-structuring or a reconsideration of policies or strategies, the themes were frequently taken into account to inform thinking. For example, one HEI was moving from a standard modular base of 15 credits to 20 credits and this meant that every module in the university had had to be redesigned and re-approved. This provided an opportunity to embed the themes in course design:

In the learning and teaching element within the module descriptors we have required schools, module leaders, to explicitly say how things like Research-Teaching linkages, scholarly skills, employability and flexible approaches to assessment are being embedded within the modules. So it's been an actual real trigger to actually embed a range of those sorts of things and we actually explicitly look for that. (director of educational development)

A Dean in one institution categorically linked the impact of the Assessment theme with examples of some quite specific and far-reaching changes to practices:

New grading scheme, attempts to reduce over-assessment in terms of changing policy and guidelines on assessment, attempts to increase the amount of formative assessment. We're still at the working-through basis. You don't need me to tell you getting academics to change practice in assessment is not easy! But I think pretty much the fact that the themes are related to the quality assurance agency makes it easier to legitimise what might be seen as radical change. To take a specific example - reducing the amount of assessment: some staff would say 'hey, you are reducing

standards', but to be able to point to an authoritative body of evidence that is saying 'look, over-assessment actually damages learning'. So certainly I think the themes have been very significant in that aspect.

This same informant could make similar links with previous themes and touched on the intention to 're-visit' some of these as different priorities emerge:

Responding to Student Needs has shaped approaches to engaging with student evaluations, feedback etc and I would say in terms of current working, Integrative Assessment, The First Year, Research Teaching Linkages are the three that are particularly relevant to what we are currently focussing on. We guess Employability will come back on the scene again and in a way it is being sort of nudged along through work on PDPs and - what are they called? – Scottish Higher Education Employability Networks. We dip back into these resources.

In some institutions conferences or other events had been held around particular theme topics, not so much as a means of disseminating theme outcomes but more as a way of raising awareness of what the themes are about. In one institution this had had considerable impact:

That's one area where I have to say now, I suppose it's a subtle shift going on – the Research Teaching Linkages. We have two staff conferences every year and the one in January was about research teaching linkages and that attracted a wider audience than our normal staff conference in that a lot of the research active staff went along to that. That was a kind of really positive day and I think everybody went out having taken something away and learned something from it and I've then seen a change within our faculty certainly in some of the research professors, including the Associate Dean for research who is pushing this idea, looking at making even more links between teaching and research and making sure that the research is feeding into teaching and so on. I think the enhancement theme has kind of helped with that shift. (institutional contact)

In one institution, funding from QAA had helped to fund the publication of a newsletter to publicise key events and developments in Academic Professional Development and quality enhancement. There is a regular section of the newsletter relating to the QE themes. The two institutional contacts explain how valuable this newsletter has been:

We started off as a result of the funding we got as institutional contacts and thinking through how we wanted to use it. So we've had two editions so far and we were able to continue easily because of the funding, if we wanted to continue without the funding, it might be slightly more difficult in the present financial climate.

So there is a focus on this one on the QETs on a particular page but generally the stories are about learning and teaching within the institution and we've found that the general institutional magazines and so on tend not to focus on that area very greatly or have the space to do that. We now have the ability to publicise various things and there's a diary as well. So the general academic population have that as a mechanism of understanding and relating to what's going on – at least having an awareness of it.

We now turn to examples of impact which are not as evident in terms of changes to practices or physical resources but which, nevertheless, provide good examples of the less tangible but influential impact of the themes.

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 effective vehicles 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. It is felt to be extremely beneficial to have a common focus for enhancement activities across the whole sector. One of the student officers interviewed provided a student's perspective on this:

I like the fact that people are speaking about it and it gives a focus and that is really useful for us because it means we can home in on areas because as the student rep, at whatever level, there's so many other things to do that you can't encompass everything. These are the kind of things that you'd be working on all the time. So from year to year if there is a focus it really does help and you can actually get work done and I really think that that comes through with a lot of them.

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. Examples include:

I think it's actually encouraging people to articulate more clearly the way in which research informs their teaching and the way in which the teaching itself is research-orientated through developing students with enquiry skills. I think all that was actually there and, again, it's just providing an umbrella that focuses debate and enables people to talk about it in a coherent way. (vice dean academic)

I think it's undoubtedly the case that there has been far more discussion and far more thinking about practice in these areas over the five years, six years that the themes have been running than there was in the five or six years before that or the five or six years before that. So it seems to me there's undoubtedly been a significant amount of agenda-raising and of putting these things on the table that says 'what are we doing about these? What are we thinking about them? How's it working?' and so on. (dean)

One head of department felt that the Employability theme had had quite significant impact upon his own practice:

I can speak most about Employability because I've had responsibility for that for some time and that has made a difference – certainly from my perspective in terms of the actual nature of the course. It's beginning to be embedded in what we teach and from my personal perspective, I have much more a sense of how – it sounds a bit clichéd but it's true - that can be exciting for beginning to try to make connections. I think it's mostly to try to make students in Arts subjects recognise how many things they could do - you know, the world is wide open for them – and how they can use something that they are really interested in, that really drives them to work, that also relates to the world of work. I think in general terms, it just makes me as an academic more aware of the needs of students and have a better sense of how I can help.

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. At least one HEI has invited international visitors to share experiences:

Another impact which might not be the case with all the themes but some of the bigger impact we've had at this university is where the themes have embraced communities overseas – like Flexible Delivery where we had someone over from University of Southern Queensland who worked with us for a while. University of Southern Queensland are significantly ahead of us but we are in the same direction as them so we've struck up a good and on-going basis with them. The Responding to Student Needs and First Year type of work, there were some people came across from the States and were involved in sort of national events but were also available to come into the institutions. Similarly with Research Teaching linkages there was a colleague brought over from, I think, University of Sydney and they spent a day or two here talking to staff and running workshops. So I think that dimension has been useful as well. It's sort of broadened our horizons so it's not just within the Scottish context. (director of educational development)

Another informant, not in the same institution as the above, agreed that the international perspectives was extremely valuable and stimulating:

One of the things that has come through to me and, in a sense, you have to be personal with these things, is the stuff that's about the First Year Experience and I guess the thing that impacted on me about that was the international dimension of all these things of some of the key people coming from North America or New Zealand or wherever, talking about things that they'd done that wouldn't be an exaggeration to say were things that were done in a completely different way. It's people coming and saying 'well, let's almost imagine we had a blank piece of paper and think about how we're going to do this'. I think that's been quite interesting as a shake-up - a little bit of just bringing a different style of thinking, almost, into things. (dean)

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.

5.2.3 Conclusions

To summarise, 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. Significant factors affecting impact, are timing and ownership. If the time was not right for a particular institution to engage with a theme, then impact will have been minimal. However, some themes which were not regarded as particularly relevant to institutional priorities at the time, are now being re-visited in the light of changing priorities. In terms of ownership of the themes by the sector, there is a general acknowledgement that the themes link very well with current developments and most have been relevant and useful in helping institutions to address priorities. In fact the point was made that it would have been surprising if the themes did *not* match onto priorities within the sector as they were selected by their institutional representatives on SHEEC with that in mind. This is just one example of the way in which institutions themselves are now directly involved with the themes in contrast to the rather more passive role they played within the earlier themes.

Whilst most institutional senior managers view the contribution, or potential contribution, of theme activities as a 'reward' in itself, the additional financial resources attached to the current two themes, although 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.

Whilst there are many concrete examples of impact of the themes within HEIs, the extent to which the themes have been solely responsible for some of these is often difficult to trace. It could be argued that this does not really matter provided the end result is enhancement of the student experience. However, there has been considerable investment in the themes of the part of key stakeholders such as QAA and the SFC and, also, of course on the part of the HE sector who have invested considerable time and energy into engagement with theme activities and, understandably, to be able to attribute direct causal links between themes and an enhanced student experience would be the best possible outcome of this evaluation. Unfortunately, the picture that is emerging is far less clear-cut. There *are* clear instances where a direct effect of a theme can be traced but there are equally many more instances where the themes *may* have had an impact but are only one of many potential influences. It may be that the most significant forms of impact are the least amenable to 'measurement' or even clear articulation – these are the subtle changes in attitudes that combine to bring about a change in institutional culture. We noted signs of this in our final report of the QEF evaluation – key informants agreed that the QEF had achieved legitimacy and they saw a culture shift taking place, at least at senior management level, in higher education institutions. On the basis of this current, admittedly much smaller-scale evaluation, this 'culture shift' appears to be still very much in evidence as the themes impact upon and influence practices of a wider range of stakeholders within institutions.

5.3 Dissemination

Impact is dependent upon the extent to which the sector at large is aware of what the themes have achieved. One informant saw the issue of dissemination as one of the challenges for the theme strategy that had not yet been fully resolved:

If there's anything that I think could be stronger, and that's not a criticism of what's been done, it's this business of dissemination. That's the bit as an academic community we haven't cracked yet. That's not to say the people running the enhancement themes are doing anything wrong but I think there are some real challenges that are still there that says 'how do we take all this and how do we package it in ways that individual academics can pick it up? Therefore if something was to be done differently, some creative thought on that area of things – I think there's more benefits to be gained in some ways from disseminating and getting into the practice of academics what's already known and what's already out there that there is from learning some new things.

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 (the taking part in theme activities) and product (the tangible outcomes such as reports). Whilst it was generally acknowledged that there *did* have to be products in some shape or form, the interviews stimulated considerable discussion over the most useful formats for these and the most effective ways of disseminating them across the sector.

Process and product

As we noted above, those who had been engaged in theme-related activities, particularly in the case of the current themes the First Year and Research-Teaching Linkages, had found this involvement to be stimulating and beneficial. Consequently, a number of informants raised the issue of the balance between the relative values attached to process and product: is the process of engaging in theme activities *per se* of equal value as the end (more tangible) product (generally a written report)? A number of those who had been actively involved with the themes, either in a management capacity or at 'ground level' through project activity, were enthusiastic about the benefits of the process of engagement as an end itself:

I'm much more conscious of the processes that take place during the themes. And by the time the final end of theme dissemination comes along, it's almost like we've moved on beyond that. My sense is that the dissemination is almost a formality – the final dissemination – and it's almost like it's not finally wrapped up because it's an on-going thing. (institutional contact)

If you see the value of the enhancement themes not in its outputs but in its process, then I think you get much closer to them. But for me, the real value is the actual engagements and it's what staff do during the enhancement theme and it's the way

that they engage with it, it's the internal workshops they go to, it's the way in which that's disseminated back down into Faculties and Schools either by the school reps on the committee or by the minutes going up and down, it's that act of engagement that's of value there. The outputs sometimes are almost a side issue. They are a by-product almost. And I think that's where the focus ought to be – getting people for a particular period, getting people engaged in one aspect of their work. It's almost like a refreshment. It's almost like 'this year we're going to focus on this particular aspect of your work. It might be flexible delivery, it might be assessment, it might be whatever, but this is the year in which you're going to have to particularly think about that and in particularly thinking about it, you're engaged with it, you may change your practice'. The institution might change its policies as we've done or strategies as we've done in some cases. I suspect that when the RTL outputs come out, people won't read them. I guess people learn actively and they'd rather learn actively with their colleagues in a workshop setting than they would by sitting in their rooms reading a book or even reading a website. (senior manager)

Another senior manager made the point that interpreting outcomes to fit institutional contexts was a useful process in itself as it led to a deeper understanding of underlying issues. However, she emphasised that this was a complex issue that maybe had not been given enough consideration when planning the themes:

Maybe the product is the process within the institution and that sense of clarifying for oneself what we mean by all of this. But I think some of the themes are about process and some of the themes are about process *and* product and that there are clearly some that do have a product and there was a process that people went through. If you access the product at a later stage you can still go through that process, I mean you still generate the discussion, you generate the debate and development work and so on. You don't skip that stage but you've got a clearer idea of what it is you want to achieve, you know, the materials that are there. Maybe just some of them are a process-based conclusion rather than anything that will become a resource. I don't know, I really don't know. I don't think SHEEC knows either!

A practitioner who had been engaged in one of the theme projects agreed that the process had been really useful in terms of sharing good practice with others across the sector. However, she felt strongly that, valuable though this process had been it was equally important to have a product at the end of it:

I think the product matters. I think the process matters as well but if a lot of time and money and effort has gone into this process, at the end of the day to avoid people re-inventing the wheel, there should be a good quality product with practical examples so that another institution can come and say 'I'd like to pick up with that and run with it here'. Why go away and spend time trying to put something together when it's already been done elsewhere?

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 valuable experience in its own right. 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.

We now move onto the somewhat contentious issue of the most useful and effective form of dissemination of product outcomes. To date, dissemination of theme outputs

has tended to be through a combination of written reports, on-line resources and/or conferences or other similar events. Informants provided a number of comments, positive and negative, on each of these channels of dissemination.

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 ('great big tomes of stuff') for busy academics to find the time to read. Consequently, many of these 'sat on shelves' and were little used:

They are rarely used and I think staff have a quick skim at them when they arrive, we circulate then widely and we stick them in the library and we've tried to pull out some things that might be particularly relevant for our own Subject Review process or for Schools that are going through whatever kind of development. But are they references that the institution uses on a regular basis and staff who were thinking about changing their assessment might go to? No, they're not. And I don't know whether we're unique in that or we're pretty typical. I suspect we're pretty typical. And so we're spending, as a sector, a huge amount of cash on publications that are of limited use. That's not to say they don't contain lots of very valuable information but limited use is made of them. (senior manager)

Some volumes that have come in have been distributed to Vice Deans Academic or Deans, or whatever, but whether they do anything other than prop up the books. I mean I've got boxes of them in my office that still haven't been disseminated anywhere, because there's just too many of them. (senior administrator)

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 (and this evaluation report may well be criticised also in this respect!). One of the institutional contacts confessed that she had found it quite difficult to write a shorter report:

I had to really unpick my own disciplinary training in the humanities, to re-learn a skill that I had probably when I came in as an undergraduate but had lost - which is how do you write snappy reports that tell people what they need to know and then move on from that?

The first quote below is from a member of one of the theme steering groups who had argued strongly for a much shorter final report for that theme but was out-voted:

We had a long discussion of what the output ought to look like. We were sitting round a table and we talked over it and then at the end of the day we lost out and everyone said 'no, that's no good, this can't be taken seriously, the Funding Council expect us to prepare a long report and how can we present this as a serious activity?' I think that the problem is that there is a tenancy to put professional educationalists on the panel to make sure things are done 'properly' and as a consequence there is a way in which educational developers do things and one of them is to write long reports.

In terms of written material, the clear message emerging is that there is a clear preference amongst the target audience (if not the authors) for theme outputs for much shorter 'snappier' reports that allowed them to access the key findings faster (although probably slightly less succinct than the 'wee postcard type of thing' suggested by one informant):

Something that is short and sharp – one side of an A4 per theme but also links to where they can find more, identify more people, and then maybe also having awareness sessions either centrally or locally where you're exchanging ideas and disseminating good practice. (head of learning and teaching)

References to the appropriate URLs would also be useful so that readers who wanted to could look on-line for more detailed information.

A number of informants referred to the Integrative Assessment reports as a model for other themes:

Thinking back to the Integrative Assessment outputs, I think that was an example where the QAA and their staff had learned from the first couple of years and they focused in a different way and their outputs were, I think, quite useful to individuals because they were short enough. They were much shorter – a couple of sheets of paper – which helped institutions because then we didn't have the need to re-invent the wheel to make it more palatable, or a summary or whatever. This stuff was suitable for distribute directly. Short and snappy did help. (academic registrar)

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:

It's the actual practical outcomes that are important and those have to be presented in a way that I can, as a director of teaching in the School, can say to my colleagues 'look, this is actually something we can do, the reason we are doing this is because of this and so on...'. So it's the practical outcomes that are the really really important thing. (institutional contact)

I think I would have liked to have seen a little bit more practical help. So there might well be sort of templates and suggestions to do with wording of things and how you would incorporate a statement about some of these themes in your documentation. Real practical stuff I would have liked to have seen more than the – the reports were interesting but I would have liked that to have been followed up with maybe pulling out some key things. (project participant)

Not all of the reports were felt to have been written in a way that their target audiences could easily relate to. Some of the language used, for example, was felt to be too esoteric or too jargonistic:

I think also that there latterly has been a tendency to invent language, almost a geeky kind of language, so there have been things like 'co-curriculum', 'co-constructors of learning'. When did we all decide that this was a term? It's just one of those things. People get carried away and you develop this language that becomes cliquish. (senior manager)

There was also some criticism that some reports were not published soon enough once the work of the theme reached completion:

I think in some of the themes the momentum had gone before the outputs were available, if you like. And there were a number of things there that I wanted to utilise but obviously the moment went. So there is an issue of the timing of those.
(educational developer)

The common thread running through these various criticisms of text-based reports is the need to be able to access resources quickly, easily and, as the last quote above indicates, 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

Typing 'Quality Enhancement Themes' into Google leads straight to the relevant website. 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 couple of informants who found the site difficult to navigate:

I just find it very sort of difficult to navigate in a sense that if I go to the First Year enhancement theme I always - I don't know why I can never remember that - I always go through three pages to actually find the report on the project. First it goes to something that is before the project actually started - about the initial discussion which I don't understand why it is still there, then you go through a general description of what the intentions are and if you're lucky you find the report!
(institutional contact)

It can sometimes be a bit difficult. The navigation could be improved. Sometimes it's a bit off-putting. You've got to go through multiple layers before you find something but once you get there, the heart of it, it's fine.(dean)

A senior administrator felt that the potential of the medium as a dissemination tool was perhaps not being fully exploited:

I think the other thing that maybe wasn't used enough and maybe should be used more is the establishment of discussion fora. The web does give such a potential for enriching the interactivity of these sort of themes rather than just an output. How do you continue the debate on afterwards? More could perhaps be made of that. It's exploiting the tools that are embedded within the internet in a more imaginative way rather than just flat presentation of data.

Apart from these few negative comments, informants were generally complimentary and positive about the QE themes website.

The paper-based copies I think are of interest at times but I would by far prefer to have them on the web so I am not carrying them around and I can access them anywhere and, crucially, I can refer staff to them. You can't say you can't get access to them. I think a big improvement has been that the web pages were - the website

was a bit 'iffy' early on, I mean it's improved greatly lately and I also I think mounting the conference information on the web is very good. So my sense is it is all there and to work with and, for instance, Integrative Assessment is a particularly well-reported theme. You know that there's good accessible stuff there and very easy to use.
(dean)

During the course of this evaluation the Guide to the Themes Outcomes was published on-line. Publicity about this was a little slow and so few of those interviewed were aware of its availability at that time. Prior to the Guide's publication, one of the institutional contacts anticipated this as providing an excellent resource:

What I'm more interested in is the work that David Lines is doing about having something that guides you through the themes and it will be a searchable website. Now that I think is ideal because if someone wants to get fresh ideas on assessment, you don't want to go ploughing back through all the hard copies, you want to be able to get right to the heart of it on the website. So I think that would be the most attractive way of disseminating as long as the website is kept up-to-date and all of these things.

It would be interesting to find out the reactions to the Guide as it appears to 'tick all the boxes' in terms of the kind of web-based resource informants said that they would like: quick to access, easy to navigate, concise but providing a considerable number of links to further information and rich in case studies and practical examples from all the themes.

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:

In a way I probably wouldn't have been so aware of what there was out there if it wasn't for the fact that I had signed up to go to conferences and found out what they were about in the first instance, and then through choice since then. They are very very good, they are very useful and it is the networking that's really useful.

This last point was echoed by other informants – that it is the opportunities provided by the conference to hear about theme work first-hand and to share good practice with other delegates that is the most valuable part of the experience. 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

Before we move on to detailing alternative forms of dissemination that were suggested, it should be noted that 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 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. A senior manager sums up the advantages of this more localised dissemination:

To me, that's the way to disseminate information. It's to give the people a budget to go and talk to people at the universities about their project, not some great enhancement conference in Heriot Watt University where only a very small percentage of people can afford the time to go to. I feel quite strongly about that because I think they're wasting their money because of the way they try and disseminate these things. They're not looking at it in a way which is most useful to the universities. One of the things I argued very strongly against and lost the argument, was the two day conference. My suggestion was they should have had three conferences, one in Edinburgh, one in Glasgow and one in Dundee and they would have got a lot of practitioners along to that but no, no they wanted to produce the programme over two days and it was considered to be hugely successful because lots of people went. But I don't think it's the impact that it could have.... I think instead of producing handbooks they should give people budgets to go and actually talk to universities. They should have a batch of people who you could phone up and say 'oh you did something interesting in the First Year Experience, can you come and talk to my colleagues about it?' And they should be funded to do it. To me that would be the best way of dissemination.

A dean in another university agreed that this strategy would work more effectively:

Dissemination works best, I think, through champions - people who can circulate that and so on. What really makes a difference is hearing from others who've tried this and it works - 'there are opportunities here, and we've had a go at this' and so on. Actually hearing from your colleagues about what has gone on, people buy into far more than reading reports and so on.

Perhaps not surprisingly given their experience of being part of cross-institutional networks, institutional contacts were particularly keen on face-to-face dissemination:

If I go along and speak to them for 15 minutes, I can probably get the same message across in 15 minutes to a group of people which is far more effective than sending out a document and expecting them to read it when they're too busy to read it. I think what you want is a contact, a contact that you can phone up because there are always things that you don't want to commit to paper about things that didn't quite work the way they expected them to, but for political reasons within their organisation they don't want to say that - that they found one unit within their organisation completely unhelpful and very difficult to deal with! They might be willing to tell you that on the phone but not willing to commit it to paper.

5.3.1 Conclusions

In conclusion, as so many informants indicated, there can be no one dissemination strategy that suits everybody. However, to maximise impact the theme outputs need to be quickly and easily accessible *when* they are needed. To meet these criteria

web-based resources would seem to offer the best solution. Those who prefer paper-based resources can easily download and print what they need without having to spend time searching through long reports of which only a fraction may address their immediate concerns. It was telling that a number of senior managers said that they needed information such as theme outcomes to be 'filtered' for them by other staff members as they had no time to read everything themselves. There are practical issues around providing more localised dissemination (the financial implications, for example) but this would certainly be welcomed and seems to fit well with the more devolved strategy for the themes which places more emphasis on institutional rather than central 'ownership' of the themes.

5.4 Strengths and weaknesses and future directions

Finally, informants were asked for 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.

5.4.1 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 and raising awareness of specific topics across the whole of the Scottish HE sector:

Where they work, despite their monolithic qualities, when you latch upon one that's of interest to the majority of the sector, for the majority of the time, then you've generated a debate in the whole of the HE sector and that's a great thing to do. (senior manager)

I think it is really useful to have a focus across the sector. I think that one of the nice things that I have enjoyed is that I am talking to people in institutions that I wouldn't have. I would never have talked to somebody out of the art department in Glasgow College of Art so it is really useful to have a sector-wide discussion about something that affects all of us in different ways maybe. (institutional contact)

I think the collective dimension is helpful. I think also the collective discussions and debates that go on are a useful form of learning in themselves and referencing and finding out where others are compared to us and actually highlighting what are persistent problems and challenges. (dean)

The themes 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:

Getting an insight into what other people are doing in an organised way. The themes in general have given the Scottish HE sector more of an identity as a sector as a whole. It's brought people together that otherwise might not have been brought together, this has brought people together across subject areas and thinking about things in a wider context. And you learn a lot about institutions and what they're doing from the type of events that are going on. So that kind of kind of sharing of practice has been invaluable. (senior manager)

The emphasis on the student experience inherent in all the themes was cited as a particularly welcome aspect of the themes:

I think in terms of enhancing the student experience, I think one of the areas of strength would have to be the student sense of what has to be done as opposed to the institutional view of what has to be done. Thinking about that, thinking about the students, what are the students' needs, what will help them, you can immediately start to look at some of the things that we have talked about like the first year, we know that students have problems in the first year, so we know that there is a real need there. (dean)

The greater focus on enhancement rather than assurance and on improvement rather than judgment was also regarded as strong point:

For me the strength is the content and the approach, I think, empowers people because it doesn't recognise good and bad. It recognises progress across a range and I think that's good. Whatever level of institution you are, whether you are a research institution or a mixture of research and teaching or whatever, it's good for a sense of engagement across the community. (HoD)

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':

Well I think the strengths are that they allow institutions to take forward discussions in a structured way about things that are important to the majority and we are so used to having things foisted on us. That's actually a bit of a generalisation but you know what I mean. It is nice to decide your own agenda and when you do that I think there is much more buy-in automatically. On the other hand, people would say it's all very well for VPs to decide the agenda but, generally, I think that's a real strength of them. (senior manager)

Another strong feature is the increasing sense of inter-connectivity of the themes. The following quote is from a project officer and is included in its entirety as it sums up how some stakeholders are now beginning to see how well the individual themes connect:

I think one of the key strengths is the fact that they overlap and that you can see how to use various bits of information from each of the different themes in the other themes. I went to the QE themes conference and was particularly struck by the RTL presentation and how important that was for Employability. That wasn't the way in which they were focussing it but for me it struck home really well and I've used several of the slides from one of the presenters. You can see linkages between that and, again to the First Year theme and again you would look at that when you were trying to design some aspects of Employability for students. Flexible Delivery – not all of our students are on campus. Responding to Student Needs – it's very closely tied to employability, if you ask students why they come to university one of their principal reasons for coming to university is because they want to get a job. So we're responding to that immediate need that they have and their expectations when they come in. Assessment and Integrative Assessment – perhaps a bit less of an overlap with Employability although it does have some links with Employability.....So I think for me the main strengths of the themes is the fact that they do link together, they are not separate. There is nothing that we do in higher education that isn't linked to some other aspect of higher education.

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 of new possibilities:

The themes have helped to shape stories that institutions want to tell about themselves in terms of having an impact and different institutions might have plugged into different themes to tell stories about themselves. I got a real buzz out of the First Year and I wish I had more time to just hold onto that. It was like a can opener – it opened up things. That could lead to so many exciting things. (senior manager)

I think it is quite useful for these themes to look at a different way of doing things and I'm thinking of PDP here. Our view before we got involved with PDP was that it was something that was really useful for 2nd years and 3rd years students but having worked on the First Year experience we are now discovering that there are real advantages of starting with the first years even though the first years themselves do not like doing it. And so it is quite useful to put aside our prejudices and say, 'ok, let's just see what it would be like if we were to start with first year and really put our resources in there and build on that'. And having looked at the different way of doing things, we are then able to see what is coming out of it. So that would be the response I would give you - a chance to stand back and look at things from a different perspective. (member of Careers Service)

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:

I think it's also a big strength that it's a Scottish thing and that's been good for the Scottish Higher Education system - to be seen to be doing something very innovative in this area. (senior manager)

Other informants referred positively to the feeling of ownership of the themes:

I sense they are owned by the sector. There is a sense in the majority of institutions, and I guess I am speaking personally, I feel a responsibility to make use of them and

to try make them a success both as an initiative and also within my own university. I think the more we use them the more we are going to get. So I think there is a sense that they are owned. I think there is a sense that they are relevant to the Scottish context. (dean)

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:

I think that the themes themselves have been a demonstration of learning in terms of the way the theme working has evolved and the formation of SHEEC as a management entity is now becoming a community of practice in its own right. It's a group that people would complain if they weren't on it and it's becoming a focus for activity in its own right. (dean)

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.

It is very encouraging to report these perceptions of the strengths of the themes from such a wide range of stakeholders from senior managers to students. However, we need to counterbalance these positive perceptions with aspects of the themes that informants felt were weaker areas.

5.4.2 Weaknesses

As we mentioned above, the strengths of the themes certainly outnumbered perceptions of 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:

I think that to begin with there were too many too quickly. I think that members of staff got into Assessment and there would be this published and that published and then it would be 'OK, and it's Employability now'. And it wasn't that assessment had dropped off the end, it was still there but Employability was coming on. And I think there was a perception of overload to begin with. (institutional contact)

It's about assimilation and consolidation. If you are going to spend a lot of staff effort – which we have (I'm thinking across Scotland) in terms of how much time staff have spent on these themes, then they should have taken it more slowly and then they could have measured it more effectively as it is there's been like a blunderbuss of themes which all universities have tried to engage with as best they can but, for obvious reasons, it's been variable in terms of engagement. (senior administrator)

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:

Even at the moment we still do have two themes. The idea behind the five year plan I'm not sure has completely worked because we have First Year and Research Teaching Linkages operating at the same time. I think they're coming to an end now but they are not quite. And we're still dealing with the on-going actions from the previous themes. Personally, I think we should only really be having one sectoral theme at any time and the five year plan was trying to spread things out but they still have the overlap. So from the institutional perspective, you are still experiencing it as two themes at any time. (academic registrar)

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:

More and more is expected of academic staff just to get through the day-to-day activity. More and more administration falls to academic staff and every institution is working with fewer and fewer resources and trying to achieve higher and higher standards. There's a burn-out – you get to the point where 'just don't ask us to do another single thing!' The timing – I don't know if a year is long enough for a theme and I think the trend to move towards one single theme for each year – is that right? - could be interesting. I know for a lot of other development work that I get involved with, you really don't see the results for a couple of years. (member of staff engaged in a theme project)

As far as problems are concerned, there is a potential for theme fatigue 'Oh, God there's yet another theme'. Because there is, certainly in this institution, there's very much a drive towards the specific theme that's up and running, we've got to be involved, we've got to do something but we also have a new teaching and learning strategy, and we also have this and we also have that, staff are going to go, 'Oh, God not another one!' And then the discussions at SHEEC have been around whether or not we should actually stop and reflect on what it is that's gone before rather than start any new theme. And I can see that there's a lot of benefit in doing that. But at the same time there are other things that, certainly for the Scottish sector, are absolutely vital and it's vital that as a sector we sit down and discuss them. Things like for example the influence of European students. And trying to get Scottish students to leave Scotland! They need to broaden their horizons! (project officer)

This last quote contains somewhat contradictory messages – on the one hand, reluctance to deal with another theme but also the recognition that there are important issues that the sector still needs to address and, therefore, the potential for future themes that deal with these concerns. This leads on to the next area of weakness that some informants identified – that of the choice of theme topics.

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. One informant

suggested that a badly-chosen theme could damage the whole concept of the enhancement theme approach:

So get it right spot-on and I think there are huge strengths. But a lot of the time, you won't get it spot-on and therefore you tend to nibble away at them and that's where the weaknesses are. A badly chosen one that's of interest only to a minority of institutions for not much of the time, I think nibbles away at the whole idea of the enhancement themes. If you start to undervalue them, if you start to de-value them, then in future institutions will start to not take them seriously and so on. (senior manager)

This informant had some interesting suggestions to make on ways of addressing this perceived weakness which we will return to in the following section.

Communication

Finally, some informants (albeit a minority) felt that there could be better systems of communication. The following informant's experience may not be typical but serves to illustrate the general point:

Well, weaknesses - probably communication primarily. The webpage, the slightly confusing timeframe. The First Year was my first engagement in the enhancement themes full stop. I took it as it came along and people here couldn't necessarily tell me about the process so I didn't know what was new or wasn't. And the fact that it said 'you have six months, £3,000, at the end of the six months you tell us how you have spent the money and what you have done'. And so in my naïve thinking that was it. We have some more meetings of the institutional contacts and go through this but suddenly – and I missed just one meeting - there was talk of more money and the theme going on. It was in November that I heard of that meeting which took place in October or September and I got the letter offering more money on the 6th June saying please write a report by the 24th and we will give you £1,000 and we will give you a further £1,000 for discussion and £200 for someone to go to a conference! And that is one of the reasons for complication. I am disappointed with QAA in that sense because they are lovely people and they are doing everything they can but you need to be a bit more clear about the whole process because you need to plan your work as well. (institutional contact)

Finally, the following points may not be strictly related to poor communication but rather a lack of explicitness and clarity:

I would point to a weakness which I've referred to as almost a strength in the past which is that they have – QAA Scotland have – regarded the themes flexibly. But what that has meant is that there is no real enunciation of the philosophy behind them because they've been changing. And I think the time has come, and I'd hope there would be a recommendation in this report, that their place in the QEF is stated and that the model firms up a little bit. Maybe they would disagree with that, maybe they feel it needs to be flexible. But you sense shifting ground, you never quite know where you are with the model. It would be nice to know that they have now evolved to a state where they can say 'this is how they are going to be'. They may not want to do that because I think they like the flexibility but from our point of view I think that's a little bit of a weakness. (institutional contact)

His colleague added:

I would agree with that. And just a feeling that – what kind of model of change did they envisage? How did they think this would impact? What were their ideas around that? Was it a suck-it-and-see approach? Which may be just the way it has to be, I don't know, but I think where we are now, I'd like to see a clearer model.

Criticisms in themselves are interesting but more useful and thought-provoking are the suggestions offered for tackling these perceived areas of weakness.

5.4.3 Suggested improvements

Predictably, or perhaps encouragingly if this is taken as a sign of general satisfaction with the *status quo*, informants could 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

One senior manager felt that the revised strategy for the themes with the more open timeframe was a move in the right direction and would like to see this built upon to give a much greater degree of flexibility in future:

I think the early themes and kind of the idea that you did a year and cut it off, I think that was a weakness and one of the things that I've said before is what I would like to see are a few key themes which are kind of continuous until at some stage basically somebody says 'we've got this cracked'. Employability, for example, has got like that really and I would hope that the Research Teaching Linkages would get like that. And then maybe you'd have small themes or sub-themes which just rise for a little while, you know, if there was an issue at the moment with something like 'XXXX, let's see if we can do something' or there's 'oh somebody in Australia has been doing fabulous work in this area, we need to see if we can impact, well let's have a small project on that'. And I would think, as the thing matures, it would have that sort of approach. Employability is a huge thing, Research Teaching Linkages is a huge thing - these things just carry on, we don't necessarily need funding for them, but we're having an Enhancement Conference, these things are things which are always on the agenda and then you have some smaller things which come and go.

A teaching practitioner echoed this suggestion of a longer time frame to allow the themes to embed more effectively:

I do think there is potential weakness in terms of sustainability which is 'that's a theme, we've done that theme, let's stop and now move on to the next flavour of the month'. I think there's a very strong argument for going forward - coherent themes which are sustained and then become seen by practitioners as a core resource that they see as being sustained and maintained rather than 'we did that four years ago and that's all happened now and we've moved on to this' - which is not the way it should be.

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:

Every single Scottish university at the moment is battling with internationalisation in various forms – we should have identified that as a theme two years ago. I think you could define some really generic problems that international students have that could have benefitted all the institutions in Scotland. Of course, the trouble is you've always got that tension in an area like that where there would be genuine competition between institutions within Scotland for the same students – although we've all got slightly different portfolios. (senior administrator)

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:

The one thing I think is missing that could actually pull a lot of these together is the emphasis on reflective practice. Again, this is something that we do a lot of and with the personal development planning, I think it would actually pull together a lot of this. I think there's sort of a general feeling just give us time to embed these into things rather than another that's being added on. (dean)

A senior manager suggested that perhaps it was now time for the themes to shift from the generic to a much more specific focus:

It would be nice if from this evaluation came a period of thinking which led to a slightly different approach rather than just continuing down the same line with choosing national themes. I think it's difficult to keep on choosing one theme for the whole national HE sector to focus upon and expect some kind of equal engagement. We've just come to the end of two years', really, of work on assessment in different respects and, in a sense, almost any of the sub-areas that we've covered in those two years could have been an enhancement theme. Some of them, I suspect, would have attracted quite a lot of attention in other institutions and maybe that's one of the lessons as well – that perhaps the direction that this is going is more specific, more detailed, slightly less generic.

Another senior manager suggested a radically different approach to the themes:

In some senses there is a sense of rush because they are not funded in my view properly. I had wondered if it would be betterjust commissioning someone to do the sector report and then go round each institution at the end of the literature review or something – some other way of doing it because I think that the variation in the discipline work is huge and I think some of it is very superficial.

5.4.4 Conclusions

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.

6. Overall Conclusions

To conclude this evaluation of the impact of the themes, we first highlight an issue that has a bearing on how the data presented here is interpreted and which has

been frequently cited as limiting the extent to which impact can be assessed at this point in the QE strategy's development. This relates to the nature of change and to the much-quoted fact that change in higher education is a notoriously slow process. This latter issue will necessarily affect the extent to which the impact of even the earliest themes can be assessed.

Secondly, an issue which the QEF evaluation looked at (reported in the Final Year Progress Report) was that of 'bringing it all together' by integrating the themes more effectively within the wider context of related initiatives. This still appears to be a challenge for the QE themes. Also, within this general context of integration, there is a sense that many stakeholders are seeing the themes less as discrete programmes of activity and more as collectively forming a coherent framework for enhancement. In planning the future of the themes strategy the issue of 'bringing it all together' would seem to be a key issue.

Finally, we turn to the sometimes contentious issue of impact indicators. As we mentioned at the start of this report, developing a new set of criteria and impact indicators may well be seen as 're-inventing the wheel'. As part of the Final Report of the Lancaster team's evaluation of the QEF in 2006, initial indicators for each of the five elements of the QEF were developed in consultation with the sector. Those suggested for the QE themes remain broadly relevant. In this section of the report these indicators are used as a post hoc analytical framework for the findings of this evaluation.

6.1 The nature of change

As has often been claimed, bringing about systemic change within higher education is not a simple or quick process. Whilst some systems need dramatic and quick results, educational change in schools, colleges and universities is generally reckoned to be slow - partly because it involves cultural change, addressing values and practices that have served their owners well, and partly because curricular change in higher education tends to follow a six-year cycle, so that a curriculum passes from conception to incorporation into curriculum plans, to operation in the laboratory, placement or classroom and to manifestation in student performances. Often cycles are longer, with some effects of higher education disclosing themselves a few years after students graduate. As one of those interviewed pointed out, there are actually very few opportunities within the academic timetable to consider making changes:

There's another point to be made here which is extremely valid and I make it a lot, is that the opportunities for change are actually relatively limited. So you've got your five yearly programme review which is a set-piece review of what's been done – that's one opportunity. You've got annual chances to change the curriculum. Once you've published it, you may have chances of changing the way in which you teach but bigger changes to curriculum or even approaches to the first year or whatever, that requires a large amount of organisation to occur. So there are limited opportunities. There's a sort of drip-feed effect of the QETs and other influences – a huge number of other influences, including the HEA, Benchmarking – things like that. So the opportunities to change are infrequent. So again the expectation that there should be a direct connection is probably wrong. It's about creating an environment which is thinking about enhancement. I'm happy with that. I think there's a buzz

about the Scottish Higher education system around about these things – I'm not just saying that, I genuinely believe this. (senior manager)

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.

As we cautioned in our Final Report of the QEF evaluation, complex change such as that intended by the QEF and inherent within the QE themes, cannot be reduced to a simple or easily identifiable line of determination. What may be important is to be able to focus more on alignment, 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. This may sound rather nebulous and evasive if evaluation of the impact of the themes is intended to demonstrate 'value for money'. However, it was not the aim of this evaluation to carry out any kind of quantitative cost-benefit analysis and such an approach would not sit comfortably with the spirit of quality enhancement. Rather, we have used the perceptions and experiences of the stakeholders themselves to exemplify the value of the QE theme strategy.

6.2 Bringing it all together

We have already referred to stakeholders' perceptions of the themes coming together as a more coherent programme. This is summarised by the following informant:

I think they are coming together. Employability, the PDP aspect, and RTL all share most of the features. Assessment, Flexible Delivery, Integrative Assessment – it's hard to separate these out now. I very much see these as all part of enhancement and not now as individual themes. And having worked on RTL for the last nine months or a year, I see it as very closely affiliated with PDP and Employability and it's quite hard to separate them.

A practitioner said that she could now identify 'precise points where you get real crossover and that one can help the other'. 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. A delegate at the most recent QE Themes conference had been disappointed that this sense of 'bringing it all together' was not more evident in the way the conference had been organised:

I think it's interesting that within our institution we're merging them all together but at the Enhancement Themes Conference this year, it seemed to me they were still trying to separate them out and they were saying 'well, that was covered in Employability' or 'that was covered here'. So they *were* making the links but they were still trying to separate out and keep the themes very distinct which in some ways seems a bit disappointing that so far they're still thinking of them as distinct themes when within all the institutions it seems to be that we're now merging them all together and thinking about them in a more holistic way.

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' seem to be mainly 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 may be 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:

The fact that everyone else is doing the same theme has not impacted my radar one bit. I haven't got a clue what's going on - which may be a terrible confession but the fact that we are all engaging in the same theme across the sector at the same time hasn't impacted at all. (dean)

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 the HEA *could* play, 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 the Academy 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, the HEA would be a valuable source of expertise.

Finally, mention must be made again 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.

6.3 Impact indicators

As we indicated earlier in this report, 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':

- *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.

- *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.

- *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.

- *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.

- *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.

6.4 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 the full 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. Practices and ways of thinking embodied in the Quality Enhancement themes may not be attributable by stakeholders to the themes themselves. This means that the evaluation has used an 'inferential' approach where evidence of embodied practice is sought rather than a simplistic notion of attributability. Our approach puts a premium on what is happening, rather than the lost cause of cast iron attribution. We consider, therefore, that the evaluation 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.

- Continuing to attach even modest amounts of funding to themes may maximise the potential impact of activities;
- Careful thought needs to be given to decisions on possible future themes as there is certainly evidence of 'theme fatigue';
- Are there sufficient incentives for teaching practitioners to engage with the themes? There are few extrinsic 'rewards or recognition' attached to participation;
- 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;
- 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.