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Enhancing practice

Responding to Student Needs

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All enhancement themes publications are also available at
www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk

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Preface

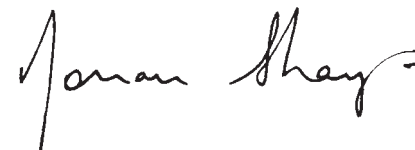
The approach to quality and standards in Scotland is enhancement-led and learner-centred. It has been developed through a partnership of the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC), Universities Scotland, the National Union of Students in Scotland (NUS Scotland) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Scotland. The enhancement themes are a key element of a five part framework which has been designed to provide an integrated approach to quality assurance and enhancement, supporting learners and staff at all levels in enhancing higher education in Scotland drawing on developing, innovative practice within the UK and internationally.

The five elements of the framework are:

- a comprehensive programme of subject level reviews undertaken by the higher education institutions themselves; guidance on internal reviews is published by SHEFC (www.shefc.ac.uk)
- enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) run by QAA Scotland (www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/ELIR)
- improved forms of public information about quality; guidance on the information to be published by higher education institutions is provided by SHEFC (www.shefc.ac.uk)
- a greater voice for students in institutional quality systems, supported by a national development service - student participation in quality scotland (sparqs) (www.sparqs.org.uk)
- a national programme of enhancement themes aimed at developing and sharing good practice to enhance the student learning experience, which are facilitated by QAA Scotland (www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk).

The topics for the themes are identified through consultation with the sector and implemented by steering committees whose members are drawn from the sector and the student body. The steering committees have the task of developing a programme of development activities, which draw upon national and international good practice. Publications emerging from each theme are intended to provide important reference points for higher education institutions in the ongoing strategic enhancement of their teaching and learning provision. Full details of each theme, its Steering Committee, the range of research and development activities, and the outcomes are published on the enhancement themes website (www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk).

To further support the implementation and embedding of a quality enhancement culture within the sector, including taking forward the outcomes of the various enhancement themes, a new overarching committee has been established, chaired by Professor Kenneth Miller (Vice-Principal, University of Strathclyde). It will have the important dual role of keeping the five-year rolling plan of enhancement themes under review and ensuring that the themes are taken forward in ways that can best support institutional enhancement strategies. We very much hope that the new Committee, working with the individual topic-based themes' steering committees, will provide a powerful vehicle for the progression of the enhancement-led approach to quality and standards in Scottish higher education.



Norman Sharp
Director, QAA Scotland

Enhancing practice: Responding to Student Needs

Editor, Professor George Gordon, University of Strathclyde

Key outcomes

Building upon views and issues generated at a series of focus groups of staff and students in Scottish higher education institutions, in March 2004, the Steering Committee for Responding to Student Needs commissioned two developmental projects on:

- Student Needs in the First Year of Study and
- Student Evaluation of and Feedback on their Learning Experience.

The key outcomes from the development projects were:

- the need to disseminate existing good practice
- the need to reflect upon, and consider ways of enhancing practice
- the lessons to be learned from international experiences and approaches to student induction, academic and pastoral support, and the organisation and support of the first year learning experience
- the arguments for more strategic, coherent and coordinated ways of responding to student needs
- the need to consider ways of addressing both the quality assurance and enhancement purposes of student evaluation of, and feedback on, their learning experience
- the importance of preparing students for entry to higher education, engaging them quickly and effectively into the learning community of the institution, smoothing the transition and process of acculturation, and providing timely and relevant academic, pastoral and professional support.

Further information is summarised later in this overview. Additionally, institutions will receive copies of a publication detailing each developmental project, including a CD of the toolkit created in the student evaluation and feedback project. This information is also available online (www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk).

The Steering Committee invites suggestions from institutions, groups and individuals of further developmental work which should be undertaken in partnership with the sector to facilitate the process of dissemination, reflection, adoption, adaptation, benchmarking and/or evaluation, in order to enable the sector and institutions to build upon, and benefit fully from, this enhancement initiative. This might, for example, include future dedicated work undertaken for the sector by the Higher Education Academy.

General introduction

The enhancement themes initiative was launched in autumn 2003 as one of the five pillars of the Quality Enhancement Framework in Scotland. The principal aim of the enhancement themes approach is to provide additional support to the sector and institutions in the continuing task of improving the student experience in Scottish higher education.

Context

In the space of 40 years, the participation rate in Scottish higher education has increased from less than 10 per cent to 50 per cent of the age cohort, a shift often characterised in the literature as the transition from an elite system to a system of mass higher education.

Student numbers have increased substantially, especially since the late 1980s. There have been associated changes in the range of entry routes, the proportions of students from the various pathways, and their average age at entry. Policies for promoting wider participation in higher education have encouraged diversity within the student body. Generational, aspirational, financial, organisational and educational trends have added further complexity. Consequently, Responding to Student Needs, was identified as an early priority for the enhancement work in Scotland.

The Responding to Student Needs theme

In autumn 2003, a broadly based steering committee was established with Professor John Harper, The Robert Gordon University, in the chair. The membership is listed in Annex A.

The topic of Responding to Student Needs encompasses a wide range of issues. Rather than attempt the daunting task of comprehensive coverage the Steering Committee opted to focus upon two specific areas for possible investigation. That focused treatment provides insights into a number of dimensions, illustrates many of the issues and demonstrates some of the complex interactions which impact upon, and inform, the needs of students in higher education.

Between November 2003 and February 2004, a project interview team drawn from administrative staff and educational developers held a series of focus groups of staff and students. This work was undertaken to inform the planning of supporting developmental work. The reports from the focus groups were analysed by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI).

Views were sought from focus groups on two key topics, which had emerged from initial discussions in the Steering Committee and a preliminary scoping of available research on issues and developments, namely:

- student needs in the first year of study
- student feedback and evaluation.

In the focus groups, a broad spectrum of student needs were explored, both academic and pastoral.

For student feedback and evaluation, the prime concerns were on ways of learning from experience and of improving practice in relation to the collection and effective usage of student evaluation of their learning. Views were sought on the extent to which the findings in a Higher Education Funding Council for England study were reflected in the Scottish higher education sector.

The report to the Steering Committee by CHERI identified a wide range of experiences and approaches within Scottish higher education institutions. It also found considerable consensus about the importance of supporting students in the first year of study and of effective use of student evaluation and feedback.

On the basis of that evidence, the Steering Committee, in March 2004, commissioned work on two developmental projects:

- Student Needs in the First Year of Study and
- Student Evaluation of and Feedback on their Learning Experience.

The range of key topics identified through consultations reported above, resulted in the Student Needs in the First Year of Study project consisting of four strands:

- Induction
- Personal Tutor Systems
- Approaches to Integrating Student Support
- The First Year Learning Experience.

Under the oversight of the Steering Committee, proposals were sought from the sector to lead each strand.

This resulted in the formation of a small Project Development Team comprising the appointed Project Director of each strand, with one Project Director acting as overall chair/coordinator (see Annex B).

For the work on Student Evaluation of and Feedback on their Learning Experience, the organisational process involved the creation of a Project Development Board, with members drawn from administrative staff on the Universities Scotland Teaching Quality Forum and student representatives (see Annex B).

A Project Officer was appointed to collect examples of good practice and of innovative approaches.

In June 2004, a National Conference was held on the theme Towards Meeting the Diverse Needs of Students Today.

The conference featured keynote presentations from Australasian speakers in addition to facilitating discourse between practitioners within the Scottish higher education sector and members of the Project Teams.

Some issues feature in more than one strand in the Student Needs in the First Year of Study project. In essence, similar conclusions sometimes emerge from different illustrative examples or surveys as the full reports demonstrate (available in printed form and at www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk).

Student Needs in the First Year of Study: key findings of each strand

Induction

The report to the Steering Committee by CHERI had highlighted the importance of useful and timely information for new students, especially on practical issues. Course handbooks and summer schools were identified as examples of good practice operating within the Scottish higher education sector.

A range of issues had also emerged from the focus groups including how to make students aware of support available to them; how to phase information and support; and how to tailor information and support diverse needs.

The developmental work for the Induction strand concentrated on international examples of good practice in induction.

Three appendices cover, respectively:

- University Policy, Strategies and Mission Statements
- Information Provision
- Evaluation and Toolkits.

The material on Policy and Strategies is taken from the University of Utah, Syracuse University, the University of Toronto, Auckland University of Technology, Deakin University and the University of Sydney.

The illustrations of Information Provision come from the University of Tasmania and Deakin University and that on Evaluation and Toolkits from the University of Sydney, the University of Melbourne and the University of Ulster.

Many Australian universities base induction programmes on addressing demands which new students encounter in making up to four sets of adjustments:

- academic (different learning approaches, assessment structures and expectations)
- geographic (study environment, travel or accommodation arrangements)
- administrative (enrolment, managing interface with the institution)
- personal (changes to social networks, taking personal responsibility for financial and time management).

This strand concludes that effective practice aims at integrated transition planning and support through coordinating support efforts, communicating the success of initiatives, connecting as closely as possible with first year students and the issues they face, and pursuing effective ways of engaging students with the learning community of the institution.

Drawing upon the literature survey, 15 characteristics of an ideal induction programme are identified, which institutions could use for benchmarking, reflection, debate and development. It is suggested that an ideal induction programme would:

- be strategically located and managed
- address academic, social and cultural adjustments that students may face
- provide time relevant targeted information
- be inclusive of all student groups
- address special needs of particular groups
- make academic expectations explicit

- include teaching staff at a personal level
- develop required computing and e-learning skills
- recognise existing skills and experience
- recognise different entry points and routes into higher education
- be inclusive of students' families
- be student centred rather than organisation centred
- be an integrated whole
- be part of an ongoing extended programme
- be evaluated with outcomes and actions communicated to relevant stakeholders.

Personal Tutor Systems and their alternatives

Topics explored in this strand are:

- identifying students at risk
- supporting a diverse student population
- models of student support
- one-to-one support systems
- combining academic advisers and personal tutors
- implications for staff development and training
- the relationship between personal tutors, personal development planning and developmental support
- identified problems in existing personal tutor systems
- the use and implementation of peer support
- the use of technology to support students
- evaluating a personal tutor system.

A range of resources are included in seven appendices.

The strand concludes with a 10 point guide to implementing a successful personal tutor system.

- Establish the role of a first year champion supported by centralised administration.
- Plan the student support strategy to address the profile of the student body and the key areas of risk and need.

- Organise the receiving environment for students including assigning students to personal tutors in the first week.
- Monitor and collate student attendance and regularly evaluate the big picture.
- Create multiple opportunities for student engagement and participation in the early weeks and provide rapid feedback on uptake.
- From the start, communicate to students realistic expectations and detailed information on the support that is available.
- Provide information that first year students need to know.
- Provide training and guidelines to assist academic staff in providing general support and in identifying a critical incident and knowing how to respond.
- Develop a code of practice for academic personal tutors.
- Integrate personal tutor systems into the general student experience and close the feedback loop to personal tutors.

Approaches to Integrating Student Support

This strand focuses on the provision, at institutional level, of support for a diverse student population within the constraints of limited resources.

Alternative approaches to, and degrees of, integration of central support services are explored.

Illustrative examples of, and approaches to, integrating academic and central support services are discussed and specific consideration is given to support for distance and flexible learning and to promoting and supporting student engagement.

The following core activities emerge from examination of integrative models, collaborative approaches and enhanced models of communication across institutions:

- increasing student-peer interaction
- increasing staff-student interaction, particularly outside the formal 'class'

- increasing students' involvement and engagement with the institution and (where applicable) making effective use of their time on campus
- linking the curriculum and co-curriculum
- increasing academic expectations among students and their levels of academic engagement
- assisting students with their preparation (both academic and personal) for higher education
- empowering front line service staff
- making effective use of emerging technologies to enable student support.

Specific examples achieving each of the above are documented, for consideration, with the proviso that institutional context may require degrees of modification. Reusable approaches and methodologies are highlighted.

The First Year Learning Experience

The key conclusions of this strand are fourfold. Firstly, it is suggested that institutions adopt a strategic approach to the first year student experience. Secondly, greater emphasis should be placed upon a coherent curriculum for first year. Thirdly, the latter raises important issues of resourcing and staff development. Fourthly, evidence surveyed indicates that these challenges can be met and that this produces positive benefits both for the student learning experience and for levels of student retention and progression.

The conclusions stem from, and are supported by, a literature survey, lessons distilled from six case examples (from Monash, London Metropolitan, La Trobe, Sydney, Ryerson and Teesside Universities), and from discussions of practical steps taken in a range of disciplines in institutions in the UK.

The strand emphasises the importance of early acculturation of new and intending entrants to higher education. While much has been done by institutions to address this issue, it is argued that a

considered and well-planned approach can ease and speed up the process of transition and acculturation.

The use of dedicated intranet sites specifically aimed at first year students, which can feed information when needed, may be a way of avoiding information overload at point of entry.

The operational definition of 'curriculum' should be broadened to embrace co-curricular, peer and informal learning.

The curriculum should include aspects of what is sometimes called the 'hidden' curriculum, eg metacognition, skills for employability and learning to learn.

Timely and useful feedback is a key means of enhancing student learning and improving the first year experience.

Student Evaluation of and Feedback on their Learning Experience

The work of the project involved:

- a survey of current approaches to student evaluation and feedback within the Scottish sector
- a search of Scottish, UK and international sources of good practice and thinking on this topic.

The outcomes from the project are:

- key points about current practice, and recommendations arising from the survey and search
- a web-based toolkit of ideas and approaches to student evaluation and feedback.

Current practice in the Scottish sector

Student evaluation for quality assurance purposes (students' views on what they have received):

- is widespread and well embedded
- is not necessarily linked to action.

Student evaluation for quality enhancement (students' ideas on actions for improvement) is not widespread and not systematic, but there are many local examples of very effective practice that is comparable to best practice internationally.

There is considerable diversity of approach to student evaluation across and within institutions.

Recommendations to Scottish higher education institutions

Scottish higher education institutions might usefully review the balance of evaluation for quality assurance and enhancement.

That reflection might also explore effectiveness of evaluation in informing and steering policy and practice and efficiency, in relation to systems and the use of the time of students and staff.

Institutions should consider how improvements could be made in order to:

- speed up processes of collection, analysis and response
- enable the institution to respond more effectively to issues and needs
- facilitate real-time evaluation during the delivery of a module or class.

Concluding observations

Scotland does not need to import specific methodology but should concentrate on making existing good practice available and accessible by providing the means of spreading good practice across the sector.

There is currently little opportunity for students to learn the skill of giving feedback although this could be cultivated by, for example, providing illustrative models of constructive feedback.

Conclusions: the way forward

Responding to student needs is widely seen by the sector as an important area for continuing attention and enhancement. It is a multi-stranded and complex topic with crucial contextual dimensions, such as the detailed student profile of the institution, the prevailing institutional ethos and traditions, the nature of the academic infrastructure and associated organisation of student support.

There are many instances of good practice and innovation within the sector including examples of learning from other institutions, in the UK and in other countries.

There has been massive growth of the sector, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Institutions are committed to providing excellent learning experiences for their students, including a suitable supportive environment which responds to their diverse needs.

Completion rates continue to be among the highest in the world.

The focus groups, information in institutional strategic plans and a considerable volume of research evidence caused the Steering Committee to select the First Year Experience of new undergraduate students as the unifying thrust of the enhancement theme. The choice was assisted by the fact that other dimensions such as the needs of postgraduate students and of students with disabilities have been/are being addressed by other major developmental projects such as the UK Grad Hub and Teachability initiatives.

The materials developed as part of this enhancement theme are intended to spark discussion and evaluation and inform institutional strategies for enhancement.

In their strategic plans, institutions have clearly articulated objectives and goals for enhancing the learning experience of their students, for widening participation and for producing highly employable graduates. A successful first year is a vital moment of transition.

That is when students start to actively engage with the institution, their chosen discipline(s), their peers and with staff and services. The research clearly indicates that effective engagement plays an important part in retention and progression. That is why these dimensions feature prominently in the developmental work.

Equally there are important, complex and sensitive issues surrounding the structure and definition of the first year curriculum and the most effective means of delivering it to the large and diverse student body.

Institutions can now use managed learning environments to maintain regular and rapid contact with students. It facilitates monitoring of student engagement. Equally it can provide students with 24 hours, seven days a week access to all of the resources which an institution chooses to make available.

Institutions recognise that they can benefit from student evaluation and feedback. The report suggests ways in which this can be enhanced and provides a toolkit to assist that endeavour.

Many stakeholders can contribute to the way forward for enhancing the response to student needs.

Institutions could use these materials to reflect on and benchmark their provision, policies, procedures and arrangements. Even where extensive developmental work is in hand, the materials should act as a useful resource.

Institutions and the sector should consider ways of maintaining the momentum of the theme, for example through putting in place ways of disseminating and sharing good practice, keeping in touch with the relevant research findings, and/or commissioning targeted developmental work and benchmarking studies. Universities Scotland, the SHEFC and the Higher Education Academy seem appropriate sources of continuing coordinated support.

In the USA, there has been a long standing annual sample study of the qualifications, expectations and aspirations of students about to enter higher education. Scotland could benefit from equivalent longitudinal data which can provide information on trends and changes, as well as current perspectives on aspirations, expectations and potential needs.

Annex A - List of Steering Committee members

Professor John Harper, The Robert Gordon University (Chair)

Professor Rao Bhamidimarri, Napier University

Dr Kim Jauncey, University of Stirling

Mr John Martin, University of Strathclyde

Ms Fionna McCleary, Glasgow Caledonian University Students' Association

Mrs Kathleen McMillan, University of Dundee

Mr Sean Morton, Stirling University Students' Association

Ms Pauline Parr, Perth College, UHI Millenium Institute

Dr Frank Quinault, University of St Andrews

Professor Brenda Smith, The Higher Education Academy

QAA Scotland officers

Dr David Bottomley, Miss Thelma Barron, Ms Elizabeth Anderson

Annex B - List of project directors and members of the Project Development Board

Student Needs in the First Year of Study

Project directors

- Induction - Dr Claire Carney, University of Glasgow
- Personal Tutor Systems - Ms Elaine Smith, Glasgow Caledonian University
- Approaches to Integrating Student Support - Ms Ginny Saich, University of Stirling
- The First Year Learning Experience - Professor David Lines, The Robert Gordon University and Chair of Project Development Team

Student Evaluation of and Feedback on their Learning Experience

Project Development Board

- Dr Alan Davidson, University of Dundee (Chair)
- Mr Duncan Cockburn, student participation in quality scotland (sparqs)
- Dr Gillian Mackintosh, University of Aberdeen
- Ms Donna McMillan, University of Paisley
- Dr Frank Quinault, University of St Andrews
- Ms Ruth Williams, Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI)
- Dr Derek Young, University of Dundee (Project Officer)

Publications

Editor, *Enhancing practice: Responding to Student Needs*, Professor George Gordon, University of Strathclyde