

# An Evaluation of 20 Years of the Enhancement Themes 2003–23

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May 2024



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## Executive summary

The following synopsis highlights key points within the full evaluation report, alongside providing recommendations for various stakeholders in the sector under the calls to action banner. For more forensic analysis of the detail provided here, please see the main report which follows.

## Overview

This evaluation has taken place from 2020 to 2023 in the Scottish higher education (HE) sector and occurred whilst the world was undergoing the COVID-19 global pandemic. QAA Scotland (QAAS) commissioned the work in 2020 in order to *understand and be able to show what difference the Enhancement Themes approach has made, in Scotland and beyond*. The primary aim of the evaluation was to identify the impact of the 20 years of Enhancement Themes' activity on the student experience. This includes the latest *Resilient Learning Communities* Theme, so that it would be possible to identify ways in which the student experience has improved, as well as recognising the enhancements to policy and practice in the higher education sector. One cautionary note for the reader concerns recognising that when the Themes' work first started in 2003, little was known about explicit evaluation of effectiveness in the HE sector. There was no formal 'language' of evaluation or knowledge concerning the importance of outcomes, let alone Theories of Change.

## Analysis and findings

A theory-driven methodology was utilised whilst adopting a participatory approach (Kara 2020) to data gathering, framed by integrative review methodology deemed appropriate for this type of evaluation (Coren and Fisher, 2006). Data-gathering activities included: secondary analysis of documentary sources, including qualitative and quantitative gap mapping; primary data gathered through observation; and focus groups and email interviews with key stakeholders within and beyond the Scottish HE sector. An Expert Reference Group (ERG) was convened for the duration to provide additional layers of evidence contribution and triangulation, comprising individuals who had a distinct connection to the Scottish sector, alongside those with evaluation expertise nationally and internationally.

The evaluation of impact over 20 years of the Enhancement Themes (ET) required a retrospective approach, given the dearth of access to recognised evaluation information across the earlier period. Hence, contribution analysis (see TASO 2022) was identified as the most appropriate approach to analysis of impact. This approach starts with a Theory of Change process, which is co-created with key stakeholders to identify key causal logic chains. These are designed to deliberately test assumptions and to consider associated risks. From this work a Contribution Story was established which presents evidence gleaned from the 20 years of the Enhancement Themes to support, or refute, the following causal logic underpinning probable assumptions, or explanations (known as Contribution Summaries):

- 1 Can the ET evidence that the ownership of, and engagement in, each ET by staff and students within institutions and across the Scottish sector creates an infrastructure for to enable collaboration and sharing of good practice?
- 2 Can the ET evidence that collaboration and sharing across the sector leads to enhancements on behaviours for institutions, the sector, staff and students?
- 3 Can the ET evidence that changing behaviours of institutions, the sector, staff and students leads to improved student learning experiences and outcomes?

Regarding 1 above, concerning ownership engagement and infrastructure to enable collaboration, there is particularly strong evidence of the varied systems and process which have been created to facilitate enhancement activity, and the resulting impact on collaboration and sharing of outputs (see [section 4](#) of main report for more detailed analysis).

Concerning assumption 2, there is clear evidence indicating that collaboration and sharing of good practice are key features of the Scottish ETs. Direct student involvement in Themes activity has led to changes in institutional strategies, policies and practices. The specific impact on staff and students is most likely to be evidenced in recent ETs, suggesting a trajectory of engagement and evaluative reflection.

Regarding assumption 3, this is very much work in progress: whilst there are several examples of perceived, probable, or very likely impact facets indicating that there might be an explicit link between ET work and student outcomes, the causal contribution between ET activity and student experience and outcomes is still primarily implicit. This does not mean that this evidence does not exist. Indeed, the Resilient Learning Communities Theme analysis (see [section 3](#)) shows a markedly increased capability for designing evaluations and for measuring impact. The occurrence of this type of evidence in more recent Themes is indicative of a positive trend in impact reporting and in evidencing this assumption fully in the near future.

## Calls to action

As a result of this longitudinal evaluation, there are some noteworthy recommendations for staff and students, institutions and the Scottish sector alike. More detail is in the main report:

For staff and students:

- the development of meaningful student engagement in Theme activity, Theme leadership and institutional strategic priorities should be continued whilst developing overall awareness in the wider student body
- to continue to develop learning, a range of sources of expertise and advocacy to encourage agency should be sought and made accessible to Scottish staff and students
- a strategy for resource creation and commissioned activity is necessary to ensure optimum impact
- the ET should encourage and support exploration of the impact of innovative practice on student experiences and outcomes
- engagement in the ET has the potential to benefit individuals' professional development but must be balanced with institutional and sector priorities.

For higher education institutions:

- making connections between ETs should enable sustained and continuous learning within institutions and across the sector
- ET activity should be clearly promoted and integrated at all levels within institutions to enable cross-institution awareness and avoid siloed engagement or pockets of activity
- institutions should continue to actively create a coherent infrastructure to enable the outcomes of the ET to be realised. Given the abundance of systems and process for engagement, collaboration and sharing, but the lack of evidence on proportionality, it is recommended that these are evaluated to ensure effectiveness

- dedicated systems and processes for evaluation and impact reporting are also recommended as importance additions
- institutions should continue to encourage the engagement of staff in the ET beyond the known and active engagers to further develop institutional enhancement cultures
- institutional and sector-level ET activity should be theorising how activities will impact on student outcomes and then measuring this theorised change against various student outcomes
- within the latest Theme analysis, evidence demonstrates that enhancement work should be aligned, or at least considered holistically, with wider strategic change (or refresh) at institution or sector level. This ensures that effectively 'proportionate' resources will be allocated accordingly. Moreover, senior leaders with wide spheres of influence will engage and thought-lead the importance concerning the rationale for change and accompanying interventions. This 'critical mass' approach can drive better engagement and impact, alongside resourcing.

For the Scottish sector:

- the Themes should be created/structured so that longer-term impact assessment can be conducted and reported
- ensuring that ET activities align with institutional strategic priorities can make sure that activities and outputs are valued and then completed. However, alignment and integration of ET activity to strategy can impact on visibility of the ET and therefore awareness, ownership and leadership are essential for reaching an effective critical mass at a sector level
- senior leaders should consider and agree meta-evaluation processes at the outset to ensure conformity regarding outcomes effectiveness at all strategic and operational levels
- in light of changes to the Scottish sector, future ETs will need to be inclusive of the experiences of all institutions to ensure relevance across the Scottish tertiary sector
- cross-sector enhancement activity should preserve the embedded ethos of collaboration and sharing of good practice
- given the abundance of systems and process for engagement, collaboration and sharing, it is recommended that these are evaluated to ensure optimum effectiveness
- the ETs should encourage and support the exploration of the impact of innovative practice on student experiences and outcomes. Collaboration and sharing across the Scottish sector have benefited individual institutions and provide a robust rationale for informed institutional change. This is an important step in decision-making and should continue to be an aim of the ET
- the Scottish sector has developed a reputation for enhancement which is admired and is globally influential. During a period of change in Scotland, the sector could consider learning from known international contacts concerning a tertiary approach.

## Finally

If time pressed, all readers should access the diagram *A timeline of key aims, impacts, effectiveness and innovations* in the main report (figure 5, [section 4.4](#)), which depicts some of the most noteworthy achievements and innovations of the Enhancement Themes over the past 20 years. There is much to admire and learn from these decades.

Professor Stella Jones-Devitt and Professor Liz Austen,  
Evaluators of 20 years of the Enhancement Themes



# 1 Background and context

The evaluation brief set by QAA Scotland (QAAS) in December 2020 was to evaluate the impact of the current Enhancement Theme (Resilient Learning Communities), alongside the impact of 20 years of the Enhancement Themes in Scotland. The aim of the evaluation was to identify the impact of the Themes' activity on the student experience so that, at the end of Themes, it would be possible to identify the ways in which the student experience has been improved, as well as recognising the enhancements to policy and practice in the higher education (HE) sector.

It is worth noting that 20 years ago, when the Themes' work first started, little had been established, or was known, about explicit evaluation of effectiveness in the HE sector. There was no formal 'language' of evaluation or body of knowledge and/or insights about the importance of outcomes, and Theories of Change, to draw upon. Hence, much of the early Themes' work reflects the zeitgeist of this time, in which the Scottish sector knew implicitly what would make a difference to students and their learning, without having the lexicon of evaluation terminology that the sector takes for granted today in making evidencing of effectiveness explicit.

The evaluation recognises this evolving context, taking account of prevailing wisdoms available at the time concerning what counted as an effective student experience, and how evidencing of such was undertaken. Consequently, the evaluators and stakeholders involved over this period have worked diligently to show how evaluation processes, evidence gathering, and the constituents of effectiveness, have evolved accordingly during the past 20 years. Such evolution is reflected in the reporting that follows. There has also been the small matter of a global pandemic occurring for part of the evaluation period, too.

Furthermore, the evolving evaluation landscape is characterised presently towards understanding effectiveness more fully. This has led to the proposed introduction by the Scottish Government of an overarching *National Performance Framework* in 2024 as part of an integrated and sustainable tertiary education approach for colleges and universities to work collaboratively across the sector. This recognises the need to evidence expected outcomes for students alongside considering what works most effectively in pursuing these ambitions.

## 2 Evaluation overview

### 2.1 Evaluation aims

The aim of this evaluation work was to:

- identify the impact of Themes activity on the student experience so that, at the end of Themes, it is possible to identify the ways in which the student experience has been improved, as well as recognising the enhancements to policy and practice.

### 2.2 Evaluation objectives

The objectives of the evaluation were:

- to undertake an integrative review of the Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme and 20 Years of Enhancement Themes



- to design, test and implement a Universal Evaluation Framework (UEF)<sup>1</sup> for use within QAA Scotland's Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme, and beyond
- to provide evaluation capacity-building opportunities for all those involved in the Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Evaluation methods

#### 3.1.1 Introduction

This theory-driven evaluation adopts a participatory approach (Kara 2020) to data gathering, framed by integrative review (IR) methodology (Coren and Fisher, 2006) to encourage agency. Methods of data gathering for this evaluation included: secondary analysis of documentary sources, including gap mapping<sup>2</sup> (and the quantitative and qualitative data within the documentation); primary data gathered through observation (for example as the evaluators attending Theme Leaders' Group (TLG) meetings and facilitation of Expert Reference Group discussions); focus groups and email interviews with key stakeholders within and beyond the Scottish HE sector.

#### 3.1.2 Expert Reference Group (ERG)

An Expert Reference Group (protocol outlined in Appendix 1) was formed of individuals who had a distinct connection to the Scottish sector and those with evaluation expertise nationally and internationally. This evaluation offered ERG members the opportunity to share views and experiences on evaluation approaches and the Enhancement Theme(s). Members were invited to participate in 10 steering group meetings over the duration of the evaluation (2020-2023), starting formally in early 2021. The discussions within these group meetings were recorded as data. ERG engagement included critical appraisal of proposed review scope (protocol refinement), lines of enquiry, plans for testing, piloting and finalising the UEF, and draft reporting. In addition, the ERG supported discussions about dissemination, reach and reputation. Exemplar questions for the ERG included: Is the proposed evidence base proportionate to the aims and objectives? What is the counterfactual perspective and how is this considered? How can the evaluators build capacity and develop ownership of the UEF?

#### 3.1.3 Evaluation ethics

Ethical approval was sought and granted by the University of Staffordshire in February 2021. The participants for which ethical considerations apply included:

- participants within the Expert Reference Group, consisting of approximately 20 international and UK sector experts, who provided evaluative reflections (which in IR becomes data)
- participants for the evaluation including QAA Scotland staff members, staff and students at Scottish higher education institutions (HEIs)
- participants from HEIs who have volunteered to test the pilot Universal Evaluation Framework.

Information sheets and consent forms were used, in addition to ethical statements to outline approaches to confidentiality, anonymity, withdrawal and data storage, in line with a

<sup>1</sup> The Universal Evaluation Framework is an open access online tool for evaluation planning and reporting, developed as an output from this evaluation.

<sup>2</sup> Gap mapping is an analysis tool, which presents a visual overview of existing evidence on a topic or theme.

proportionate approach to evaluation ethics. None of the questions of participants were sensitive or were deemed to carry significant risk.

### **3.1.4 Triangulation of data**

Across the length of this evaluation, both evaluators independently assessed a range of evidence sources using agreed frameworks and processes; meeting regularly to discuss, refine and moderate the accrued information. This consistent approach was additional to impact, and insights gleaned from the ERG meetings.

## **3.2 Evidencing impact of the 20 years of the Enhancement Themes**

### **3.2.1 A rationale for change**

The Enhancement Themes are articulated as ‘a programme of activity, bringing together the Scottish higher education sector to proactively work in ways to improve the quality of the student learning experience’ (Enhancement Themes, 2022). The Themes aim to impact on the Scottish sector and globally. Collaboration and partnership, primarily via the sharing of practice, are identified as the primary mechanisms of change. In early communications with the funder in January 2021, an expectation to ‘understand and being able to show what difference the Enhancement Themes approach has made, in Scotland and beyond’ was articulated.

Influenced by these published statements and using expertise in participatory evaluation (Austen and Donnelly 2023), a Theory of Change (ToC) was drafted. A Theory of Change is a description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context; in this case, the change that was expected to occur as a result of identified activities during the timeframe of each Enhancement Theme, and beyond.

The ToC was co-created using evidence-informed insights of the evaluators, reflections from the Resilient Learning Communities (RLC) Theme Leaders’ Group (appreciative questioning, Feb 2022), the Expert Reference Group (Apr 2022) and feedback from the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC) members (Aug 2022). For the full ToC see Appendix 2. This developed into a generic and overarching ToC, which has utility for all Enhancement Themes. This ToC was enhanced through numerous iterations since early in Phase 1 of the evaluation.

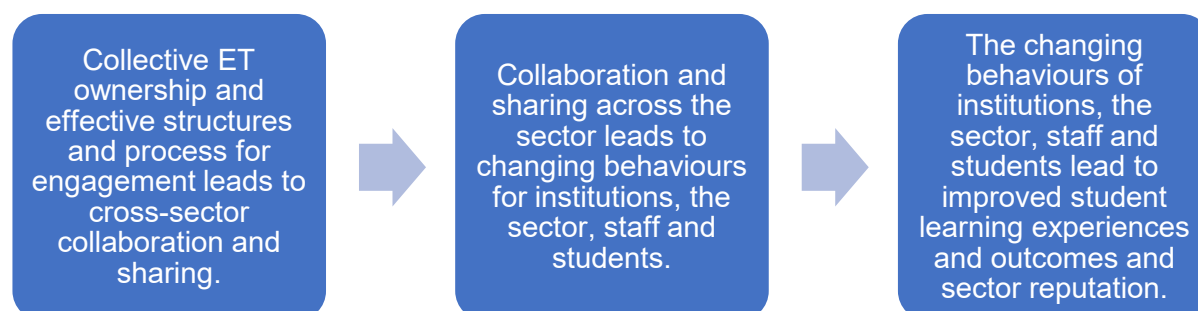
A visual overview of the ToC is integrated within Appendix 2. As a condensed overview, resulting change from the Enhancement Themes can be articulated as follows:

- through consultation and agreement, a new focus of sector-wide work is communicated
- HEIs (staff and students) become aware and then collaborate in focused and aligned activity
- staff and students feel confident and supported in their enhancement goals
- the outputs of activities are showcased and shared within institutions and the sector
- institutions adapt strategies, policies and practices in line with best practice
- the learning experiences and outcomes of students in Scotland are improved
- the reputation and influence of the Scottish sector collectively and as individual contributions to Themes work is enhanced.

### 3.2.2 Contribution story

The evaluation of impact over 20 years of the Enhancement Themes required a retrospective approach. During initial scoping, contribution analysis (see TASO 2022) was identified as the most appropriate approach to analysis of impact. This approach starts with a ToC and the identification of key causal logic chains, and tests assumptions and associated risks.

The co-constructed ToC suggests the following causal logic under exploration in this contribution story:



### 3.2.3 Data gathering

Following contribution analysis protocols, the data gathering focused on deductive evidence to support causal logic and speculations concerning any additional evidence to provide rival explanations, risks and challenges. Further data-gathering opportunities to attempt to address evidence gaps were implemented.

During Phase 1, documentary analysis and gap mapping of Enhancement Theme publications over the 20 years were conducted using a data extraction form adapted from Saks and Alsop (2019) (see Appendix 4). Thirty-one documents were analysed during this Phase and included overview reports, guides, vignettes, position papers and companion papers. Lines of enquiry (LoE) and follow-up actions were produced.

During Phase 2, follow-up actions from the documentary analysis were conducted to collate evidence in preparation for analysis and testing of the ToC. This work involved email contact to cited individuals gleaned during the documentary analysis. QAAS provided context and contact details where needed. Forty-three contacts were identified; 24 were emailed with a request for re-engagement in the Themes work. Four individuals responded to the questions posed and provided reflections on one or more of the Enhancement Themes. Requested student outcome data was also explored to look for any patterns or trends over the 20 years. Rival explanations and risks were identified during this Phase, and more data gathering was deemed necessary.

During Phase 3, reflections on the data gathered were presented to a joint SHEEC/TLG meeting in Edinburgh (December 2022). Seventeen further contacts were identified by asking attendees the following questions; three responses were returned by the agreed deadline for return.

- How can we provide further evidence on the impact of the 20 Years of the Enhancement Themes on the student experience and student outcomes?

- Can you provide contact information for colleagues who might provide evidence on Enhancement Themes impact?
- How do you know enhancement activity has had / is having a positive impact on student experience and outcomes?

To adhere to ethical principles in evaluation, personal emails (unless already used for Themes contact) and LinkedIn accounts were not used to pursue lines of enquiry. One reminder was sent to each contact.

During Phase 2 and Phase 3, very few contacts responded to email requests from the evaluators for impact evidence. Some contacts declined based on their relative distance from the work; some contacts had retired. Some contacts were involved in the Themes in a 'consultative' manner, so were not able to comment on impact. Time pressures and conflicting priorities for contacts within current HEIs was also given as a reason for non-participation.

As a response to this risk, a final request for evidence was made in February 2023 via a direct letter from the Chair of SHEEC to each institutional Theme leader asking for a coordinated institutional response. A focus group schedule was drafted (see Appendix 5) which provided evidence examples for each question asked. Six institutional responses were gathered from this approach.

The evaluators attended events led by QAA Scotland which aimed to celebrate the 20 years of the Enhancement Themes. Any observed evidence of impact against the outcomes was gathered.

Finally, during this Phase, any reference to the Enhancement Themes made within the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) annual reports (peer review of institutions carried out by QAA Scotland) was collated and cross-referenced against the outcomes. In total, 73 reports were analysed (ELIR 1 – n. 20, ELIR 2 – n. 17, ELIR 3 – n. 18, ELIR 4 – n. 18).

### 3.2.4 Data analysis

The data gathered for each Theme was mapped against the component parts of the Theory of Change evidence presented against the *intended* contribution, alongside any evidence which illuminates *other* contributions and/or provides contextual understanding. This included:

**Short-Term Outcomes (S1-S6):** the theorised short-term outcomes of the Enhancement Themes focused on the immediate development of awareness, understanding and Theme engagement in staff and students within institutions and across the Scottish sector which aimed to create a collective ownership of the ETs

**Medium-Term Outcomes (M1-M9):** the theorised medium-term outcomes of the Enhancement Themes focus on intermediate behaviour changes in staff and students within institutions and across the Scottish sector, centred around collaboration and sharing of good practice

**Long-Term Outcomes (L1-L9):** the theorised long-term outcomes of the Enhancement Themes focus on how the changes in institutional practices have impacted on student learning experiences and outcomes.

**Unintended Outcomes:** outcomes that are not anticipated at the outset but may emerge during the evaluation and can be added to future iterations of the Theory of Change. These are discussed as ‘other’ contributions to the impact story.

**Inputs (I1-I4):** the funds, resources and time that go into the Enhancement Theme to be able to carry out the activities.

**Activities (A1-A4):** the actions that the Enhancement Theme will do to bring about change.

**Outputs (O1-O5):** the deliverables and resources that result from the Enhancement Theme activities.

A full overview of this triangulated evidence is available in Appendix 6.

**Figure 1: Evidence exemplar with outcomes mapping**

Theme	Quality	Impact	Indicative evidence
Graduates for 21st Century 2008-2011	Fair as there is no explicit language of evaluation used but plenty of evidence presented aimed at strategic influencing.	Fair, and useful to follow up how the underpinning repository of resources were used within HEIs.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. ‘The Theme offered an integrative approach by taking a holistic look at the graduate journey. This approach <a href="#">connected with previous work</a> such as Assessment and responding to Student Needs’ (S1).</li> <li>2. ‘Variety of work undertaken in <a href="#">embedding graduate attributes into various curricula</a> is a testament to the success of the Theme’ (L1).</li> <li>3. ‘We went back over the resources created and ran workshops with <a href="#">Scottish HE staff to see how they used these resources</a> ... We evidenced our work through the production of reports on the workshops as the formal QAA reports produced as part of the project. Given that much of this evidence is based on HE practitioners bringing forth and sharing their pedagogy’ (L1).</li> <li>4. Evidence of change: ‘<a href="#">wide acceptance of graduate attributes within HEIs in Scotland</a> and the ways in which these are instantiated in curricula and pedagogical practices’ (L1).</li> <li>5. The work on this ET ‘fostered a sense of the unique <a href="#">collaborative</a> approach to HE that is evident in Scotland ... I know through external examining in <a href="#">Universities in England that they looked on somewhat enviously</a> at the collegiate and collaborative approach taken by Scottish HEIs and the focus on quality enhancement rather than simply quality assurance’ (L2).</li> </ol>

## 3.3 Evaluating the Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme

### 3.3.1 A rationale for change

The Theory of Change was designed to be relevant to all Enhancement Themes. In addition to testing this assumption and exploring impact against this model, the evaluation also aimed to investigate the following questions aligned to the Resilient Learning Communities (RLC) Enhancement Theme. These questions were set by the Scottish sector and were guided by four priority areas (equality and diversity; community and belonging; supporting staff and student success; and flexible, accessible learning). Questions comprised:

- What will our learning communities look like by 2023? And what can we do now to prepare for them?
- Who are our current and future students and how will they want to learn? How can we gain a clear understanding of their needs? What information do we need to enable us to best support their learning?
- How can we capitalise as a sector on the attributes students bring?
- How do we ensure we are able to support our diverse learning communities? What might this mean for our staff and our infrastructure?
- How should we anticipate, influence, and respond to the changing external environment? How can we engage with our stakeholders and ensure we are influencing strategy and policy both in Scotland and beyond?

### 3.3.2 Evaluation capacity building

Building on the recommendations from the preceding evaluation of the Evidence for Enhancement Theme: 'Embed evaluation processes and capacity building into the work from the beginning of each Theme' (Thomas 2021), a multifaceted approach was employed. The evaluators' capacity-building activities were as follows:

- created a 'Basic Guide to Evaluation' and a 10-point framework, which was published on the Enhancement Theme website<sup>3</sup>
- revised the reporting templates for HEIs to focus on reflective questions (see Appendix 7)
- reviewed institutional end-of-year reports and provided feedback on evaluation quality and impact for each institution
- delivered progress drop-ins for staff working on ET activity
- provided bespoke support for sector-level activity
- designed and delivered five workshops for the Scottish sector: Theory of Change, Creative Evaluation, Sensational Surveys, Fantastic Focus Groups, Confident Claims. Sessions were recorded and published on the Enhancement Theme website
- attended and updated process and progress at relevant sector groups and committees

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<sup>3</sup> Basic Guide to Evaluation and Ten Point Evaluation Framework are available at: [www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/about-enhancement-themes/evaluation-of-the-enhancement-themes](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/about-enhancement-themes/evaluation-of-the-enhancement-themes)

- facilitated reflections and piloting of the Universal Evaluation Framework to influence end-of-Theme reporting.

### 3.3.3 Data gathering

The data gathered to explore the impact of the RLC Theme is generated primarily from documentary analysis of annual institutional plans and reports. An analysis of overall evaluation quality and pathways to impact is the focus. The evaluators have not commented on the choice and rationale of aligned institutional activities. Capacity-building suggestions were provided as feedback on suggested follow-up actions.

The overall institutional impact over the three years of the Theme is based on end-of-Theme reporting using a template co-constructed with QAAS and is focused on overall impact rather than reporting at activity level. The overall impact of sector-wide projects is gleaned from a similar end-of-Theme reporting template.

A focus group with key sector stakeholders was offered in May 2023 but this session was cancelled due to limited availability. One of those invited submitted written responses.

### 3.3.4 Data analysis

#### Analysis of documentary sources

Ratings of HEIs' evaluation reports were carried out in each year for all HEI reports. This used a modified version of the Saks and Allsop (2019) data extraction process on each occasion for consistency. Each year's submissions were sampled and moderated accordingly. Analysis was possible across two rated facets: overall evaluation design in year 1 and year 2 and year 3, and impact assessment in year 1 and year 2 and year 3 (see Appendix 8 for Overview: RLC Evaluation reports).

**Figure 2: Resilient Learning Communities evidence exemplar**

HEI	Overall evaluation quality	Impact	Follow-up actions
XXXXXX	<p>The work informing this phase has been crystallised into 2 evidence-informed strands or workstreams, comprising:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• XXXXXXXX</li> <li>• XXXXXXXX</li> </ul> <p>Really strong approach to building on evidence-informed processes to extend and triangulate with Themes' work successfully.</p>	<p>Good to see some impact already being built upon. Useful to consider proportionality at outset when planning project impact in some areas.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Highlight the evidence-informed, refined approach as a model of good practice.</li> <li>2. Examine proportionality considerations at design stage for ensuring wider sustainability?</li> </ol>
XXXXX	<p>The university has paused most of its RLC ET work in year 2 and has identified the following 5</p>	<p>Due to minimal implementation and lack of further detail concerning progress,</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Encourage the university ET team to develop supportive governance</li> </ol>



	<p>projects to be undertaken in year 3, comprising:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• XXXX</li> <li>• XXXX</li> <li>• XXXX</li> <li>• XXXX</li> <li>• XXXX</li> </ul> <p>Nothing yet implemented fully so difficult to discern evaluation effectiveness due to being at early planning stages.</p>	<p>projects' impacts can't yet be assessed fully.</p>	<p>structures to ensure efficacy of any proposed projects.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Consider how outcomes can be strategically aligned to overarching Theme.</li> <li>3. Model some ToC approaches in the university so that envisaged projects can develop appropriate outcomes and impact mechanisms.</li> </ol>
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#### 3.3.4.2 Analysis of focus group data

As stated above, despite several attempts at rescheduling, the anticipated focus groups were not held concerning gathering additional evidence for the Resilient Learning Communities Theme. Pressures of time were cited as the primary reason for a lack of overt engagement. Moreover, the shifting landscape to developing an integrated tertiary framework across the further education and HE sector in Scotland by 2024 appears to have caused an understandable attentional emphasis elsewhere. In mitigation, the final-year reporting template (refer to Appendix 7 for all reporting templates) has been designed to incorporate summative and cumulative evidence gleaned over the three-year period of the Resilient Learning Communities Theme.

## 4 Key findings

### 4.1 Resilient Learning Communities year 3

#### 4.1.1 Overview

HEIs submitted end-of-Theme reports in July/August of 2023. The reporting template was updated by the evaluators to focus attention on outcome reporting and articulation of lessons learned. The HEIs which had the highest scores in the quality of overall evaluation approach and impact assessment (n=8) were selected for further analysis of impact against the long-term outcomes of the Enhancement Themes Theory of Change. This mirrors the approach taken in the analysis of the 20 years of the Themes. A brief discussion of medium-term outcomes is also included in acknowledgement of developing impact and explicit reporting of ongoing evaluation.

#### 4.1.2 Medium-term outcomes (behaviour changes)

All reports continued to discuss medium-term outcomes. These included staff engagement (in CPD related to new initiatives, projects completed and funding bids), student engagement (student interns, engagement in evidence gathering), the creation of policies (for example, recognition of prior learning (RPL), teaching awards criteria, Assessment for Learning

adoption), the development of new practices (for example, flexible learning), the development of understanding and knowledge and awareness (for example, of student demographics), and dissemination mechanisms such as through networks and practice guides. Student co-design, co-creation and students as partners (with partner Students' Associations or through intern/champion schemes) were referenced specifically as a key activity for enabling outcomes. In addition, sustaining sector-wide collaboration and sharing of practice remains a key priority and driver of enhancement and this occurs frequently in this sample of reports.

### 4.1.3 Evaluation and evidence

These reports, in comparison to previous Themes, focused much more attention on evidencing long-term outcomes, in addition to reflecting on pilot implementation and evidence-informed rationales for change. However, many HEIs in this sample suggested that evaluation and learning was still ongoing. **A future reporting point is recommended to fully gather the evidence of longitudinal impact for the RLC Theme.**

*'With phased implementation across two academic sessions, the impact of this will remain under evaluation'*

*'phase 2 is currently under review'*

Some of these highly scoring reports explicitly referenced staff engagement in evaluation capacity building provided by the evaluators, and the associated learning, as an outcome. The resources provided by the evaluators during the impact reporting workshop have also been used effectively. **It is therefore recommended that the Enhancement Theme Theory of Change is revised to include evaluation capacity building as an activity**, to ensure this is resourced and owned by the Scottish sector and continues to be a defining feature of the Scottish enhancement approach.

### 4.1.4 Long-term outcomes (realising aims)

Across the sample, there was evidence that institutions had adapted strategies, policies, and practices based on learning from RLC enhancement activity. Examples included influence on strategic visions, new practice and partnership networks, curriculum redesign, and policy updates.

*'Collectively, the projects have impacted aspects of the XXX strategic vision for 2040'*

*'XXX practices successfully embedded into the curriculum'*

*'Changes have been made to University policy regarding lecture capture'*

*'has featured at XXX Committee this year, where a paper was agreed to trial a paid model and a project plan created for the evaluation of the trial. This has led to further work, and the development of 5 new paid student posts'*

There was also evidence that Scottish institutions are perceived as responding to changing environmental needs in higher education, particularly through nomination and achievement of internal and sector-level awards and dissemination of practice across the sector.

*'These have been disseminated widely through presentations across the Scottish HE sector, and have resulted in further funding being secured to support future phases of the project'*

*'we were asked to share our practice for a CDN event and the XXX Celebration of Learning & Teaching'*

Through wider dissemination of the RLC work, the Scottish sector is also influencing practices to enhance student experience and outcomes globally. This includes engaging with HE organisations with international reach, and direct sharing of learning. Further work could focus on following up on the impact of international dissemination.

*'The Principal Fellow Network design principles have been shared with Advance HE'*

*'Making guidance documents open to the sector ([open education resources](#)). This provided other institutions with the opportunity to adopt XXX resources rather than build their own from scratch. This was highly appreciated by colleagues across the UK sector, and beyond'*

*'The findings of this project have been presented at multiple local and international conferences'*

In relation to impact on students, projects which focused on institutional change were more likely to evidence impact on the student body as a whole. Co-created and participatory approaches of relevance to institutional context were cited as most effective in developing impact.

*'Impact to XXX's student body across all aspects measurable by student feedback, representing the highest level of student satisfaction in the last 5 years... Student satisfaction with manageability of their course assessment workload reached 85.9% in Session 2022-23. ...the roll out has impacted the vast majority of the XXX student and staff population'*

*'This project was a participatory activity, and this has been enhanced by their input – it has been more relevant to the target population as a result'*

*'Direct impact on staff and student experience, through the delivery of a change initiative that is designed, delivered and championed locally.'*

Most evidence of impact for students was for those directly involved in the delivered interventions. A range of evidence was presented from various data-gathering exercises and reflections. The evidence included impact on student satisfaction and experience with the intervention and specific development of skills, confidence, and employability.

*'Benefits are immediate and sense of personal engagement and connection to the positive change are clearly defined.'*

*'Post-event evaluation data indicates that there was a 93% satisfaction regarding the effectiveness of the event, and 100% satisfaction with the training team'*

*'Change in student experience and views of group work post intervention'*

*'The respondents reported gaining specific skills such as essay writing...and gaining study skills and digital skills'*

*'certain society members have reported gaining increased skills/knowledge through societies'*

*'The overall satisfaction with the event remaining at high 80% and above.'*

*'Feedback shows increase in the awareness of resources available to students [and] correlation in increased number using the services promoted at the events (mental health and wellbeing resources, careers and employability resources, study skills resources'*

*'[Student Champions] wrote and submitted their own abstract for the European First Year Experience international conference. This was accepted and the Student Champions gave an excellent oral presentation, thus acting as ambassadors for both XXX and Students as Partners approaches, whilst also developing their own experience and employability prospects'*

There were also reflections on the associated improvement on their sense of belonging to their institution and within the sector, which was a key consideration of the RLC Theme. Evidence of accessibility and reach was also a useful indicator for this outcome.

*'feedback from student participants has been overwhelmingly positive, with a small selection of illustrative comments included below. 'What's working well with XXX from your perspective?': 'It's very welcoming' 'The sense of community' 'The concept is great, the event itself creates a sense of community...' 'Bringing people together' 'Thanks for this. I wouldn't be able to cope without these nights' '...I'd just like to point out that given the cost-of-living crisis/housing crisis we're experiencing at the moment, this initiative is just really nice and warms my heart. so, thank you!!' 'Thank you so much for providing this. Really means a lot this year'*

*'project developed skills and sense of belonging of student interns...'*

*'... increase engagement from wider population for example The XXX group comprises 40% students with physical and cognitive disabilities. Students have reported that they felt comfortable joining the group, that they belong'*

The sample reports discussed wider staff engagement with the Theme activity and thus evidencing an institutional commitment to enhancement and associated success. For staff directly involved in Theme activity, **a wide range of professional development opportunities were cited, reinforcing the impact of Theme activity of the individuals involved, even beyond allocated funding.**

*'The momentum created has meant that in the Resilient Learning Communities Theme, over 75% of these XXX projects have been led by staff with no prior experience of Enhancement Theme work, a value which was below 30% previously... a substantial increase in the numbers of individuals involved'*

*'reflected by broad dissemination through publications (5, including a Wonkhe blog on resilience and a book chapter on widening participation), conference presentations (17), posters (9) and Theme Leaders Group webinars (2)'*

*'Persistence of staff community after cessation of funding'*

*'The wide range and number of staff who engaged with Theme activities is a significant indicator of success'*

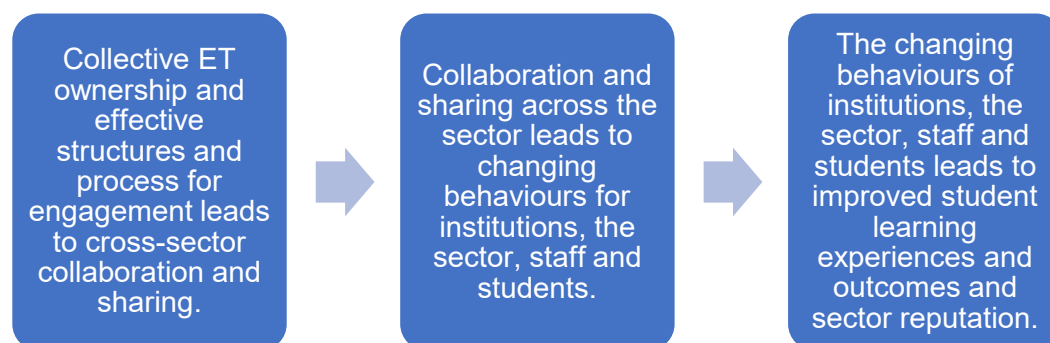
*'6 of the projects have presented their findings at a number of external conferences over the last 2 years and have been invited to work with others in the Sector to develop further outputs leading to professional satisfaction and recognition....has inspired others to get involved'*

*'of the RLC institutional project and resulted in a number of high-quality outputs, including two peer reviewed publications (under review) and four conference and poster presentations'*

## 4.2 The overall ‘Contribution Story’ of the Enhancement Themes 2003-2023

Over the last 20 years, the Enhancement Themes have aimed to ‘bring together the Scottish higher education sector to proactively work in ways to improve the quality of the student learning experience’ (Enhancement Themes, 2022). Following the principles of contribution analysis, the contribution story of the 20 years of the Enhancement Themes presents evidence to support or refute the following causal logic:

**Figure 3: Proposed Contribution Story**



Evidence will be presented against this *intended* contribution, alongside any evidence which illuminates *other* contributions and/or provides contextual understanding. Abbreviations will reference the evidence source, for example, ELIR (Enhancement-led Institutional Review) and LoE (Line of Enquiry). The following Contribution Summaries articulate findings emerging from this process. This evidence will be further separated into reporting against agreed short, medium and long-term outcomes. Quotes are listed unreferenced to preserve the anonymity of the institutions. Evidence sources are listed. Indicative quotes have been included.

### 4.2.1 Contribution Summaries

*Can the ET evidence that the ownership of and engagement in each ET by staff and students within institutions and across the Scottish sector creates an infrastructure to enable collaboration and sharing of good practice?*

There is evidence of the development of awareness, understanding and Theme engagement in staff and students within institutions and across the Scottish sector. There is particularly strong evidence of the varied systems and process which have been created to facilitate enhancement activity, and the resulting impact on collaboration and sharing of outputs (see medium-term outcomes). These contributions create the foundations for the infrastructure needed to progress widespread awareness and ownership of the enhancement agenda; however, at times across the 20 years, this has been inconsistent.

The future-facing lessons learnt from the *short-term outcomes* are:

- Enhancement Themes should be explicit about the intended outcomes of activities at the outset
- the Themes should be created/structured so that longer-term impact reporting can be conducted and reported
- making connections between Enhancement Themes should enable sustained and continuous learning within institutions and across the sector

- Enhancement Theme activity should be clearly promoted and integrated at all levels within institutions to enable cross-institution awareness and avoid siloed engagement or pockets of activity
- ensuring that ET activities align with institutional strategic priorities can ensure that the activities and outputs are valued and then completed. However, alignment and integration of ET activity to strategy can impact on visibility of the ET and therefore awareness and ownership at a sector level
- in light of changes to the Scottish sector, future ETs will need to be inclusive of the experiences of all institutions to ensure relevance across the Scottish tertiary sector
- institutions should continue to actively create a coherent infrastructure to enable the outcomes of the ET to be realised. Given the abundance of systems and processes for engagement, collaboration and sharing, but the lack of evidence on proportionality, it is recommended that these are evaluated to ensure optimum effectiveness
- dedicated systems and processes for evaluation and impact reporting are also recommended as importance additions
- the development of meaningful student engagement in Theme activity, Theme leadership and institutional strategic priorities should be continued whilst developing overall awareness in the wider student body
- institutions should continue to encourage the engagement of staff in the ET beyond the known and active engagers to further develop institutional enhancement cultures.

*Can the ET evidence that collaboration and sharing across the sector leads to enhancements on behaviours for institutions, the sector, staff and students?*

There is evidence that the systems and process created for disseminating, sharing, and collaborating and the outputs generated from these activities have developed and been effective over the 20 years such that there is an evidenced causal contribution here between the short-term and medium-term outcomes. Collaboration and sharing can claim to be a key feature of the Scottish Enhancement Themes. Direct student involvement in Theme activity has led to changes in institutional strategies, policies and practices. The specific impact on staff and students is most likely to be evidenced in recent Enhancement Themes, suggesting a trajectory of engagement and evaluative reflection.

The future-facing lessons learnt from the [medium-term outcomes](#) are:

- cross-sector enhancement activity should preserve the embedded ethos of collaboration and sharing of good practice
- given the abundance of systems and processes for engagement, collaboration and sharing, it is recommended that these are evaluated to ensure optimum effectiveness
- a strategy for resource creation and sponsored activity is necessary to ensure optimum impact
- to continue to develop learning, a range of sources of expertise and advocacy to encourage agency should be sought and made accessible to Scottish staff and students
- the trajectory of widening engagement of staff and students, and the resulting impact on behaviours and learning should be continued. As meaningful student engagement can lead to changes in institutional strategies, policies and practices, this change should continue to be evaluated to assess the impact on student learning experiences and outcomes

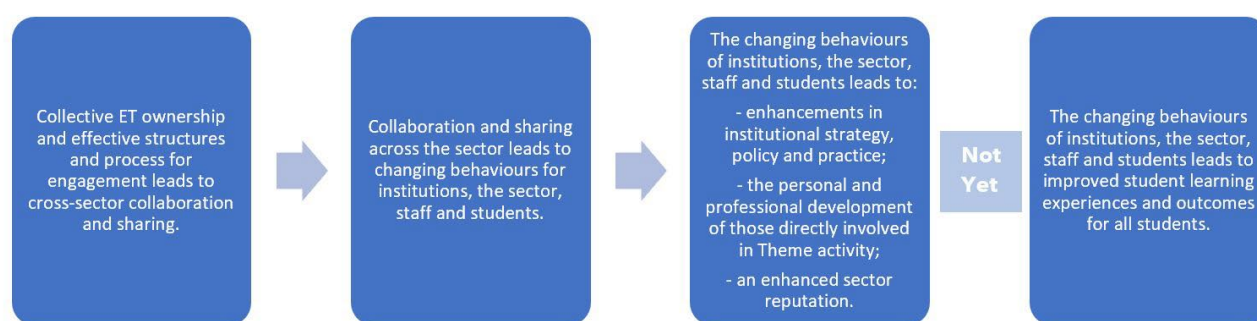


- the momentum of providing evaluative reflections within analysed reports should be continued and should become an integral feature of future Enhancement Themes
- the ET should encourage and support the exploration of the impact of innovative practice on student experiences and outcomes.

*Can the ET evidence that changing behaviours of institutions, the sector, staff and students lead to improved student learning experiences and outcomes?*

The learning which has developed from the sharing and collaboration of ET good practice has made a significant positive contribution to institutional strategies, policies and practices across the sector over the last 20 years. Collaboration and sharing across the Scottish sector have benefited individual institutions and provide a robust rationale for informed institutional change. The Scottish sector has also developed a reputation for enhancement, which is admired and is globally influential. Collaboration across a range of spaces in ET activities evidences an impact on students and staff that have been directly involved in the ETs. Whilst there are several examples of perceived, probable, or likely impact in the available sources, the causal contribution between Enhancement Theme activity and student experience and outcomes is the weakest of the outcomes across the 20 years.

**Figure 4: Revised Contribution Story**



The future-facing lessons learnt from the **long-term outcomes** are:

- during a period of change in Scotland, the sector could continue to learn from international contacts already established to sense-check future tertiary approaches
- staff should continue to be supported to evaluate against a set of clear sector-level outcomes for each Enhancement Theme
- to plan for future evaluations of impact, institutional and sector-level ET activity should be theorising how institutional changes will impact on student outcomes and then measuring this change
- engagement in the ET has the potential to benefit the personal and professional development of staff. This can be a hook to engagement but must be balanced with institutional and sector priorities.

## 4.3 Discussion

Based on the strength of the evidence collated and analysed, the Contribution Story has been revised. There is not enough evidence within this evaluation across the 20 years to conclude that the Enhancement Themes have an impact on student learning experiences and student outcomes for all. This does not mean that this evidence does not exist. The occurrence of evidence in more recent Themes is indicative of a positive trend in impact



reporting. This conclusion highlights an area for further development in evidencing the longer-term impact of institutional and sector activity to make the implicit explicit.

#### 4.3.1 Realisation of agreed short-term outcomes

The theorised short-term outcomes of the Enhancement Themes focus on the immediate development of [awareness, understanding and Theme engagement in staff and students within institutions and across the Scottish sector](#), which aimed to create a collective ownership of the ETs. Table 1 below maps anticipated stakeholder engagement in the specified short-term outcomes.

**Table 1: Designated short-term outcomes concerning awareness and understanding**

Stakeholder	Specified outcome
Sector	<p>S1. Through consultation and learning, gaps in student outcomes and experiences are identified as in need of further enhancement</p> <p>S2. A new Enhancement Theme is promoted and owned across the Scottish HE sector</p> <p>S3. The sector agrees to a proportionate plan of work for the duration of the Theme</p> <p>S4. Systems and processes are created for engagement, collaboration and sharing</p>
Students	S5. All students in Scottish institutions become aware of, and some engage in, Theme-related activities
Staff	S6. All staff in the Scottish institutions become aware of, and some engage in, Theme-related activities

The first outcome explored, [through consultation and learning, gaps in student outcomes and experiences are identified as in need of further enhancement](#). There is evidence of sector [consultation](#) in the development of the Themes. There are also various forms of evidence that suggest that learning from one Theme was used to develop and shape another. These [connections](#) and then [legacy](#) of the Themes include how:

- the Employability Theme influenced Research-Teaching Linkages and Graduates for the 21st Century Themes
- the Research-Teaching Linkages Theme was influenced by the Assessment and Employability Themes and drew links with the First Year Experience Theme
- the Graduates for 21 Century Theme was connected to the Themes of Assessment and Responding to Student Needs
- the Developing and Supporting the Curriculum Theme was influenced by prior learning and an understanding of what change was necessary through the Graduates for the 21st Century Theme
- the Developing and Supporting the Curriculum Theme and Student Transitions Theme were described as having a longitudinal and exponential impact within institutions.

In terms of the creation of the Themes, the gap mapping (Appendix 3) suggests that there has been a good [rationale](#) provided for most Themes with a clear description of activity and engagement of various stakeholders, whilst the reflections of lessons learnt for each Theme have improved over time. The Themes have not been explicitly structured so that

longitudinal impact evidence is championed at the outset, although this is noted as an aspiration within some of the Themes.

The extent to which each new Enhancement Theme is [promoted and owned across the Scottish HE sector](#) varied over time and by institutions. Some end-of-Theme reports specifically reference good engagement (Research-Teaching linkages 2006-2008) and other examples include reference to a 'sense of collegiality...that common purpose that the Themes encourage' with benefits cited as 'better awareness of what the sector is thinking' (Higher Education Institution - HEI).

Reflecting on staff engagement over the 20-year period, one key contact noted, 'An ideal Enhancement Theme must be relevant to the wider community and designed to foster a more natural relationship with student partnerships'. Evidence from ELIR reports show high levels of coordinated institutional activity to promote engagement, especially in recent years, with some earlier commentary regarding challenges for local level (school/department) engagement:

*'While there is evidence of strong engagement with the national Enhancement Themes by individual staff, engagement across the School is variable ...teaching staff did demonstrate awareness of topics such as graduate attributes, employability, responding to student needs, and assessment, while often being unaware that these related to national Enhancement Themes or that there was such an initiative' (ELIR 2)*

There is some evidence of the effective [integration](#) of ET work within institutions and contrasting evidence of siloed rather than institution-wide engagement. There were also comments that suggest that the strategic integration of ETs could be improved to avoid supporting 'pockets of activity' which are 'dependent upon informal networks and collegiality' (ELIR 1). There are also suggestions in the evidence that effective ET integration within institutions should occur and be visible in areas of both leadership and practice.

*'The University has effectively integrated its work on the Enhancement Themes with existing initiatives in the institution in ways that support the implementation of its QES' (ELIR 1)*

*'[the institution noted] the value of the Developing and Supporting the Curriculum Theme (DSC) in raising the profile of the Themes by linking otherwise disparate activities under the DSC banner' (ELIR 3)*

There is recognition of the challenges of [aligning](#) of ET work and institutional strategy and evidence that levels of institutional engagement depend on alignment with strategic priorities. Activity explicitly aligned to strategy was seen as effective and has been encouraged, and beneficial when coinciding with new structures and processes.

*'A number of the national Themes have matched well with XXX priorities, for example there are clear links with The First-Year experience and XXX's work on induction; similarly, the national theme on Employability links with XXX progress in that area. There is likely to be benefit in XXX considering prioritising its involvement with the national Themes in order to target support for institutional priorities' (ELIR 1)*

*'The nature of the University's mission and goals has meant that most of the national Enhancement Themes have been closely aligned with work already being done ... particularly those Themes dealing with the first-year experience, assessment, flexible curriculum, and defining graduate attributes' (ELIR 2)*

*'At the national level, the University has engaged principally with those national Enhancement Themes which align with its own strategic priorities for enhancement' (ELIR 2)*

*'Staff commented that engagement in the current Student Transitions Theme...has proved particularly valuable, given the close alignment between the Theme and the University's aspirations for widening participation' (ELIR 3)*

The relationship between institutional strategy and priority has been a consistent area of exploration throughout this evaluation and from early lines of enquiry and analysis of Themes reports. There is a continued lack of clarity in the direction of influence between broad Enhancement Themes and institutional strategies and the associated impact on awareness, engagement and activity at a local level.

As indicative of learning and adaption to sector needs, key contact commentary regarding the Evidence for Enhancement Theme reported that substantive changes had been made to ensure greater alignment between the sector Theme and institutional strategies to secure engagement.

Whilst there was evidence of considerable institutional activities enacted in alignment with each ET, there was sometimes a [lack of awareness](#) that institutional enhancement activity related to the sector-level Enhancement Themes. This has been a feature of several Enhancement Themes:

*'Subject-level staff have a limited awareness of the five priority areas identified by the College under the Graduates for the 21st Century banner' (ELIR 2)*

*'Widespread engagement with the Themes across the University remains a challenge and, although staff are engaging with a variety of enhancement initiatives which have been informed by the Themes, they do not necessarily recognise these as such' (ELIR 3)*

*'It was clear that staff were aware and valued these projects and their positive impact on the student experience, however they were not always clear how these projects directly linked to the work of the Enhancement Theme itself' (ELIR 4)*

Awareness of ET activity also appeared to be an issue when institutions had already embedded the values or activities promoted by the sector and were [not perceived as relevant](#) to all institutions. In ELIR reporting for cycle 1 it was noted that 'the Theme on Flexible Delivery appeared not to have captured the imagination of staff'. The Graduates for the 21st Century Enhancement Theme was perceived as highly relevant to most providers and enabled a review of portfolios and practice; however, ELIR 3 noted that the development of Graduate Attributes list, which was a common sector-wide institutional outcome of the Theme, was deemed unnecessary for one institution due to the embedded nature of vocational delivery. In cited examples where awareness/relevancy was questioned, these institutions were invariably specialist providers.

The fourth short-term outcome mapped evidence of where institutions across the sector were [creating systems and processes for engagement, collaboration and sharing](#). There was a plethora of evidence for the present Resilient Learning Communities Theme (the largest of all short-term outcomes) indicating that institutions across the sector [actively create an infrastructure](#) to enable medium to long-term outcomes (such as learning from others, and then making changes to institutional practices) of ET to be achieved, and this has matured and become more embedded over time. Examples of systems and process (in order of frequency of reporting in the ELIR reports) include: working groups and steering committees; networks/communities of practice/liaison groups; staff development workshops/seminar series/PGCert; conferences; annual reporting; organisation by central units; embedded agenda items on existing committees; funding for pilots and projects; publishing outputs (case studies, newsletters, resource banks); awards/rewards and audits.

The example below highlights the possible connection between the structure and impact:

*'The Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching (PgCertHET) encourages those participating to develop innovative approaches to learning, teaching and assessment in line with the Themes, and the University has recently published a collection of these with the aim of providing a source of ideas for, and reflection on, enhancement-led practice' (ELIR 2)*

The effective dissemination and learning from Theme outputs through schools and units also [reinforced ownership](#), highlighting the interconnections between outcomes in the short term. Evidence from earlier Themes did note some challenges in the development of systems and processes for engagement, collaboration and sharing. A [lack of coherence](#) and clear strategic framework for supporting engagement, dissemination and learning was cited in various ELIR cycle 1 reports, with requests to systematise arrangements to enable dissemination and discussion of mechanisms to enable learning.

At sector level, in addition to the annual activities of QAA Scotland, there were examples of additional processes created to enable engagement, collaboration and sharing, including Project Development Boards (Student Need) and 'an active community of practice leading to the Scottish HE Employability Network' (Employability) (Lines of Enquiry - LoE). ELIR reports also noted considerable engagement of institutional staff with Theme committees and steering groups, with the caveat that, 'The diseconomies of scale associated with a Small Specialist Institution understandably make it difficult for staff to find the time to sit on steering groups or to lead workshops' (ELIR 1). In more recent Themes, sector progress included the introduction of collaborative clusters which encouraged cross-sector dialogue and more individual involvement in sector projects (Evidence for Enhancement). Collaboration was also specifically included in grant agreements during this Theme.

The final two short-term outcomes relate to the [awareness and engagement of staff and students in Theme-related activities](#). There was an [evidenced increase in student engagement](#) in more recent Themes (since 2008), although consideration and discussion of students has been evident throughout the 20 years. In the early Flexible Delivery Theme, 'Student opinion was also canvassed on the kinds of flexibility they would like to see in the delivery of academic programmes, related support and services' (LoE) and in Research-Teaching Linkages, a sector-wide project to enable conversations between institutions specifically aimed to involve both staff and students. In later Themes, student engagement built upon the starting point within the Student Transitions Theme in which students became more integral to decision-making. Participants noted how the Evidence for Enhancement Theme explicitly invited one staff and student from each institution onto the Theme Leaders' Group as equal members. During this Theme, consideration of 'busy staff and students' also resulted in the production of 'shorter, attractive outputs that could be of practical and immediate help'. This was reported as having a 'big impact on awareness and direct engagements with Theme outputs' (LoE).

Specific [engagement with students](#) within institutions, and positive reflections of engagement, has included identifying student engagement as a strategic priority and close relationships with Student Associations/Unions and enabled by key contributions of Officers. This is in addition to mechanisms to support student engagement beyond consultation such as student-led conferences, project work or support to engage in sector enhancement conferences and committees. In later Themes, the direct engagement of students in project work and defined roles, such as student interns, increases within several institutions and into the current Resilient Learning Communities Theme. Evidence of the awareness of Themes activity in the wider student body is more limited.

*'Work undertaken for the Graduates for the 21st Century and Developing and Supporting the Curriculum Themes has been instrumental in helping the University to shape its graduate attributes. The positive impact of this is clearly evidenced by students who are actively engaged in a variety of related projects. For example, the ELIR team noted the innovative use of student interns working in partnership with the University to explore curriculum development' (ELIR 3)*

*'Through the Student Transitions Enhancement Theme, the University's approach to student partnership was demonstrated through the employment of 28 student interns to lead on projects across the University. For each, the staff-student partners determined the content, scope and management of the project, including facilitating gathering student feedback as part of the process' (ELIR 4)*

Finally, **awareness and engagement of staff** in the ET over the last 20 years again varies between direct and indirect engagement. In the wider staff groups, these outcomes ranged from awareness and support of the connections between ET and institutional activity and supporting the Themes via attendance at events. Direct engagement included work within aligned institutional projects and roles within ET committees and steering groups, including Theme development. This awareness was also credited with shifts in institutional enhancement culture:

*'Overall, staff are knowledgeable and confident about the University's enhancement agenda, including how it relates to the national Enhancement Themes. Many staff identified examples of school or service-based initiatives, which had been established in response to either or both of these. Examples included: enhancing research-teaching linkages; implementing graduate attributes within programmes; and innovation in assessment practices. Overall, staff provided clear evidence of a shift in institutional culture to one of quality enhancement' (ELIR 2)*

*'The Themes' work has contributed to the fostering of a culture of enquiry, evidence gathering, and innovation' (HEI)*

Engagement and awareness of a wide variety of institutional staff was sometimes recognised as a challenge, and this point overlaps with evidence presented for outcomes S1 and S2:

*'The University acknowledges that, beyond the XXX Project, staff participation in earlier national Enhancement Themes has been largely confined to staff in Professional Services and individual enthusiasts, and that engaging the wider academic community in the Themes has proven to be a challenge' (ELIR 2)*

There is evidence of progress to encourage greater staff engagement by some institutions since the early Themes, with a particular outcome around the inclusion of professional services staff in Enhancement Theme work in recent Themes. This does appear to be dependent on the context of the institution, as highlighted in this contrasting evidence:

*'In previous themes most of the University's engagement in Enhancement Themes had been by professional services staff. This has changed in recent years' (ELIR 4)*

*'One of the key outcomes of the Evidence for Enhancement Theme was a better and closer working relationship between those involved in Theme activity and the broader population of professional services staff' (HEI)*



However, there were also examples of lack of staff awareness across the breadth of an institution in ELIR 4, suggesting that wider staff engagement within institutions is still an area of risk for the ETs and is likely to impact on medium and longer-term outcomes.

*'The University recognises...that more needs to be done to increase the visibility of the Enhancement Themes across the institution, noting the linkage between Theme activity and the origin of outputs and resources is not apparent beyond members of the senior team. The ELIR team also supports the University's position, with the majority of the wider staff body who met the team largely unaware of outcomes, resources or activities that had taken place as part of the University's current or previous Themes work' (ELIR 4)*

There are some [outcomes gaps](#) in the evidence identified, namely whether [the sector agrees to a proportionate plan of work for the duration of the Theme](#). A review of the connections between activities and impact is recommended.

### 4.3.2 Realisation of agreed medium-term outcomes

The theorised medium-term outcomes of the Enhancement Themes (Table 2) focus on [intermediate behaviour changes in staff and students within institutions and across the Scottish sector](#), centred around collaboration and sharing of good practice.

**Table 2: Designated medium-term outcomes concerning behaviour changes**

Stakeholder	Specified outcome
Sector	M1. The Scottish sector collectively learns from national and international practice to inform institutional and sector practice
Students	<p>M2. All students in Scottish institutions feel confident in reaching out to colleagues for support and guidance</p> <p>M3. Via their Theme engagement, students in Scottish institutions begin to use knowledge to innovate and explore what might work, or not work, in their context</p> <p>M4. Via their Theme engagement, students in Scottish institutions develop, embed and scale the showcased ET work within their institutions</p> <p>M5. Via their Theme engagement, students in Scottish institutions feel that their engagement in the ET is making a difference</p>
Staff	<p>M6. All staff in the Scottish institutions feel confident in reaching out to colleagues for support and guidance</p> <p>M7. All staff in Scottish institutions feel supported in their mission to improve student experience and outcomes</p> <p>M8. Via their Theme engagement, staff in Scottish institutions begin to use knowledge to innovate and explore what might work, or not work, in their context</p> <p>M9. Via their Theme engagement, staff in Scottish institutions develop, embed and scale the showcased ET work within their institutions</p>

The first medium-term outcome was a frequently observed indicator of impact and identifies a key strength in the contribution story. This discussion relates to ETs evidencing how the

sharing of resources and collaborating contributes to Scottish sector learning and specifically how institutional and sector practice learns from national and international sources. This outcome was evidenced in almost all Themes over the 20 years going back to 2003 when a focus on dialogue, conversation and diverse stakeholder input was noted during the inaugural Assessment Theme.

Whilst early ELIR reports of institutional mechanisms highlighted some need for development, for example, requests for more regular, formal, structured and systematic processes for developing and disseminating good practice, this has been commended in more recent cycles, with [effective approaches to promoting good practice evidenced](#). There is an [evidenced causal contribution](#) here to the fourth short-term outcome and illuminates how specific systems and processes result in collaboration and sharing.

*'The University has an effective approach to promoting good practice in learning and teaching and the ELIR team identified its approach to sharing and disseminating good practice and engagement with the national Enhancement Themes as areas of positive practice' (ELIR 3)*

In addition to the systems and process identified above, in some institutions this impact has been achieved via enhancement-led professional development, often led by key roles or development teams.

Similarly, there are connections between valued ET activities, outputs and impact. 'Shared learning' is specifically referenced in the Student Transitions Theme. Case studies are noted as facilitating innovation in the Employability Theme. When outputs were written with various audiences in mind, this was perceived to be effective, as seen in the Employability Theme. National and institutional conferences were also widely cited as an effective dissemination approach:

*'A range of staff have participated in Enhancement Themes conferences and the University has also contributed case studies, which other colleagues have drawn on to further good practice' (ELIR 4)*

*'XXX provides annual funding to support a small number of pedagogic projects linked to Themes activities, with the outputs from these shared widely through a number of internal fora, including institution-wide seminars, staff workshops and XXX's annual Learning and Teaching Conference' (ELIR 4)*

The term 'good practice' is commonly used to refer to the sector and institutional outputs, which enable this impact. Knowledge of student contexts and reflections of what might work are examples of shared outputs. For example, a documentary analysis of the Student Transitions Theme reporting suggested 'The data show that Enhancement Theme work has broadened understandings of student transitions, highlighting that they are multiple, multidimensional and individual' and 'Social and pastoral aspects of transitioning have been illuminated, alongside academic transitions' (LoE). Examples are also provided of the learning that develops from sharing good practice. One staff member commented on the impact of a Theme conference presentation:

*'I remember speaking to colleagues afterwards from XXXX and XXXX, who then took some of my ideas and embedded those within their own institutions...they continue to work with those resources...that's just an example of how the Theme does pull us together as a community. And it means that within institutions and across institutions and between institutions, there's not the necessity to reinvent the wheel. It's about sharing practices; it's about joining the dots' (HE1)*



The reflection on [national and international expertise](#) and partnership with sector bodies (for example within Employability) is also noted. National 'external specialists and invited speakers' within institutional conferences have enabled learning from good practice (ELIR 2) and is cited as 'broadening horizons' (ELIR 3). The use of international perspectives within the produced ET content was cited in the Flexible Delivery Theme (2004-2006) and Integrated Assessment (2005-2006). As an example of institutional learning:

*'This has included inviting representatives and experts from the Themes to lead workshops at the College Education Conferences in 2004 and 2005. In particular, the College is drawing on expertise and ideas from the Assessment Theme in its enhancement of the effectiveness and efficiency of assessment, and from the Employability Theme' (ELIR 1)*

However, an important reflection from a key contact noted a risk to impact pertaining to the abundance of Theme outputs:

*'Many of the outputs are often a suite of resources and so it must be noted that the plethora of resource toolkits available can be overwhelming and as such their uptake and intended impact is diluted. It would be better to concentrate on fewer activities focusing on those that can ensure a bigger impact across the sector.'*

Furthermore, the gap mapping (Appendix 3) summary also noted gaps in the effective measurement, effective decision-making (curtailing or stopping activity based on evidence) and reporting of unintended outcomes. This has led to an '[activity density](#)' of initiatives and outputs but with varying levels of evidenced impact evidence. The Evidence for Enhancement Theme has made some progress to addressing these gaps.

The next set of medium-term outcomes relate to the [behavioural changes evidenced in students and staff](#) within institutions or those working directly on ET activity. This evidence of impact is clustered within the most recent ETs (Developing and Supporting the Curriculum, Student Transitions and Evidence for Enhancement), with reference to Theme Leaders' Groups and presenting/co-presenting at QAA conferences.

There are pockets of activity and impact relating to students who have been involved in ET work within this evidence, including notes of students as change agents (Developing and Supporting the Curriculum) and 'meaningful student engagement' (Evidence for Enhancement) with examples given of the co-creation of a data dashboard, and general praise for the input of student full-time officers (HEI). Therefore, there is evidence here of the [contribution of direct student involvement](#) in Theme activity in the medium term and longer-term outcomes of adaptations to institutional strategies, policies, and practices based on learning, in addition to their own personal and professional successes. This includes the impact of student interns and students in project work who evidence innovation and showcase their work:

*'Enhancement Themes funding has facilitated the employment of several student interns to work in the development and delivery of the associated mini projects. Most recently this has also led to the continuous employment of two of these students by the Department of XXXXXXXXX to continue to help shape the learning and teaching strategy of the University' (HEI)*

*'In the Developing and Supporting the Curriculum Theme there have also been several striking examples across the sector of students as change agents. Many enhancement projects have been led by student interns or involved students as team members. School/faculty student officers have been appointed not just to amplify the student voice, but to play a partnership role in development projects. In a number of these we have seen*

*student involvement in trialling a range of methods for enhancing the way feedback to students is provided and acted on' (LoE)*

*'They [students] are now part of the XXX projects, and they are embedded and it's fantastic. You get a sense of the student experience from these projects. They can inform us; they can help us understand what works' (HEI)*

*'Student volunteers "road tested" modules created by staff for online and blended learning. The initiative grew to include student perspectives on university policies, co-creation of learning materials for staff, and the creation of two Student Engagement Officer positions. Working in collaboration with the Students' Union, 20 students were recruited from across XXX's five faculties, including undergraduate and postgraduate students, to co-produce and "road test" online modules, learning materials and policies during the pivot to online teaching, in response to the COVID pandemic. In addition, they developed a student-led event for staff on how to engage students online during lockdown' (HEI)*

*'In the first year of the Developing and Supporting the Curriculum Theme, two PhD students in the School of History organised a subject-specific study skills workshop. They applied for Enhancement Theme funding to run it again. This provided scope to expand the number of workshops. A showcase event was held in XXX at the end of the first year of the Theme. The University's Student Developer heard the presentation and wrote the initiative into her department's budget. The following year, workshops were delivered in 10 Schools in the XXXXX Faculty. The programme has continued to expand and currently involves 13 Schools in both Arts and Science' (HEI)*

Evidence against the medium term explored outcomes for staff, however there is overlap between student and staff outcomes as articulated by one HEI:

*'Enhancement Themes made staff aware of the whole student experience. For the first time we saw the value of involving students at all points in the Undergraduate journey. "Working in partnership" started to be used as a term and gave rise to an approach that persists to today where all committees now have student reps on them and there is a dedicated forum...that ensures consultation of the student population on all new University policy'*

The ETs evidence reach in staff engagement across varied institutional spaces. More than one HEI reflected on the interdisciplinary nature of shared learning and collaboration.

*'The Themes have helped the University to reflect on their own effective practices and in particular the extent to which we promote, foster, and celebrate interdisciplinary learning, teaching, and scholarship. For example, the 2014-2017 Theme ("Student Transitions") was identified as being particularly effective at bringing together disparate but interconnected strands of work' (HEI)*

The Student Transitions Theme also had 'a broad meaning to a number of different stakeholders throughout institutions, from students to academic and professional services staff' (LoE). This was replicated in the Evidence for Enhancement Theme as the scope of impact on staff behaviour widened:

*'One of the projects under the banner of the E4E Theme involved staff from planning departments and this was a new departure as these were not colleagues who had any prior involvement with the Enhancement Theme activity' (LoE)*

*'The Enhancement Themes have helped to raise the profile of people who are primarily teachers in our university. And that is fantastic. I think it's also involved...staff who work with in the teaching and research track, who also are passionate about teaching' (HEI)*

There was some evidence of the direct impact of Theme engagement on the knowledge development and innovation on staff:

*'I was participating in many of the events for the Employability Enhancement Theme around the time of 2004-2006. And by attending those events, it really introduced me to some of the underpinning theory about employability and the different facets of employability... So, it really helped me to think about the preparedness for our students to embark upon a yearlong placement' (HEI)*

*'The Flexible Delivery Theme provided an opportunity for our staff (primarily through the programme leaders forums which were established at that time by the Enhancement Theme lead and became the focus of much of the University's Enhancement Theme activity) to engage with the wider context in which higher education operates. Activity such as this cemented the importance of the Programme Leader Role in driving innovative practice' (HEI)*

*'What it's allowed me to do is contact other members of staff across the university that I would never have had maybe the inclination, if I'm honest, or the experience to contact them. But I now work closely with professional services that allows me, well, to attempt and to improve the impact on the student experience...having that experience of other members of staff's approaches, other members of staff's outlooks or their perspective, I think has really helped me understand as a practitioner how I can then go on and impact the students that I work with and that's been really important to me' (HEI)*

The evidence gleaned from HEIs includes a range of practice-based innovations which were focused on changes to the curriculum and course structure, such as the introduction of work placements (Employability), embedded personal and professional development planning (Developing and Supporting the Curriculum), academic writing programmes (Student Transitions), support for care experienced students (Student Transitions) and the development of wellbeing resources to build belonging (Evidence for Enhancement).

Furthermore, the impact on staff was noted in their personal development, confidence and innovation. In HEI reflections, all staff spoke positively about engaging in the ETs and the value of collaborating with students was referenced. In Student Transitions, 'Staff participants also spoke of their own transition processes, which unfolded alongside those of the students' and in Evidence for Enhancement, 'confidence built around articulating and evaluating evidence in relation to enhancement activity' (LoE). Finally, ELIR 4 evidence noted the positive staff reflections on involvement, including attending events and sharing good practice.

There are some [outcomes gaps](#), notably a [lack of evidence to demonstrate that all students in Scottish institutions feel confident in reaching out to colleagues for support](#) and guidance and reflections from students on how they feel about the ET work they engage in. One institution described a process of asking students to reflect on their experiences (what worked well, what could be improved, what have they learnt), although no evidence of these reflections was submitted.

### **4.3.3 Realisation of agreed long-term outcomes**

The theorised long-term outcomes of the Enhancement Themes (table 3) focus on how the changes in behaviours have impacted on [realising the aims](#) underpinning enhancing student learning experiences and outcomes and wider sector reputation.

**Table 3: Designated long-term outcomes concerning realising aims**

Stakeholder	Specified outcome
Sector	<p>L1. Institutions adapt strategies, policies, and practices based on learning from sector-led enhancement activity</p> <p>L2. Scottish institutions are perceived as responding to changing environmental needs in higher education (student, staff, civic responsibility, etc)</p> <p>L3. The Scottish HE sector is influencing practices to enhance student experience and outcomes globally</p>
Students	<p>L4. The learning experience and outcomes of all students studying within the Scottish higher education sector is improved and success is evidenced</p> <p>L5. All students report an associated improvement in their sense of belonging to their institution and within the sector</p> <p>L6. The learning experience and outcomes of students who directly engaged with the ET is improved and success is evidenced</p> <p>L7. Students who directly engaged with the ET report an associated improvement in their sense of belonging to their institution and within the sector</p>
Staff	<p>L8 All staff in Scottish institutions evidence an institutional commitment to enhancement and associated success</p> <p>L9 Staff who directly engaged with the ET evidence a personal and professional commitment to enhancement and associated success</p>

There is [significant evidence](#) that learning from Enhancement Themes activity and the sharing and dissemination of good practice has [influenced changes to institutional strategies, policies, and practices](#). The range of change to influence institutional strategies, policies, and practices includes (in order of frequency in ELIR reports): induction and transition approaches, a Graduate Attributes model/approach, student feedback processes, employability strategy, learning and teaching strategy, curriculum design, assessment and feedback policy, assessment and feedback practices, tutoring/mentoring/advising approaches, resources, code of practice, appraisal and review processes, student engagement initiatives/policy, quality assurance processes, partnership initiatives, data approaches, checklists/toolkits and project initiatives. [These outcomes were realised across all Enhancement Themes over the 20-year period and can be attributed to staff awareness and engagement:](#)

*'Engagement [in Student Transitions Theme activities] across the institution was high and much of this work is now embedded in university policy and practice' (HEI)*

As specific examples noted in initial Lines of Enquiry evidence: changes to curricula and pedagogical practices (embedding of graduate attributes, Graduates for the 21st Century), induction practices 'based on student concerns' (Student Transitions) and 'more established data dashboards' (Evidence for Enhancement). In some cases, changes were made to infrastructure to improve student experiences 'building foyer areas, cafés and library spaces resulted in changes to lighting, furniture, refreshments and disability access' (The First Year). Enhancements to structural operations were also made to further support

employability and progression outcomes (Graduates for the 21st Century), in addition to 'new student services' and a 'Student Wellbeing Working Group' (Student Transitions). There is also evidence of the scaling of successful institutional changes which began as smaller student-led enhancement projects (developed from one school to delivery in 13 schools, Developing and Supporting the Curriculum). Evidence of collated impact is seen in this quote below:

*'The Assessment Theme drove academic practice forward significantly, revolutionising staff understanding of concepts such as feedback and formative assessment as they were exposed to innovative practice from across the world. The Assessment Theme led to the adoption of a specific Assessment and Feedback policy, and our Programme Specification Proforma (PSP: the key document in the Programme Design and Approval Process) was subsequently extended to incorporate a dedicated section on Assessment. Indeed, the PSP bears the imprint of several Enhancement Themes with sections on Employability, Research-Teaching Linkages, and Graduate Attributes' (HEI)*

There is evidence that Scottish institutions are perceived as responding to changing environmental needs in higher education with impact noted as ongoing changes to institutional narratives via collaborative practices.

*'In my list of all the amazing things that the Enhancement Themes has given us, is the idea that we've been able to sense the mood of the sector and disseminate good practice among ourselves' (HEI)*

This was specifically referenced in the impact of the Student Transitions and Evidence for Enhancement Themes:

*'The extent to which the sector now actively considers the experiences of students at all stages of the higher education journey I think has been a key success of the comprehensive approach the Themes took' (LoE)*

*'The work that was conducted as part of the 2017-2020 Theme has resulted in an institutional narrative that recognises and values the diversity of student interests and aspirations viz community and belonging' (HEI)*

The enhancement rather than assurance lens was also seen as beneficial for the sector's needs, and evident in comparative comments:

*'The time they [English colleagues] spend filling out forms and meeting targets means they often have little time to do the things that matter' (LoE)*

*'I know through external examining in Universities in England that they looked on somewhat enviously at the collegiate and collaborative approach taken by Scottish HEIs' (LoE)*

The extent to which the Scottish HE sector is [influencing practices to enhance student experience and outcomes globally](#) can be seen via the direct collaborations with colleagues in other HE sectors. This is evident in South Africa who developed an enhancement approach as a direct result of stakeholder visits to Scotland. In Ireland and Iceland, connections with senior QAA Scotland staff resulted in structural modelling of enhancement within respective HE sectors. Some of these connections have continued for many years and Iceland continues to have Scottish representation on their Board, including the next Chair who is from Scotland. There is also evidence of global visibility, as research collaborations have developed from international visits and the international dissemination of Enhancement Theme work. Some of the Themes also included input from international scholars (for example, The First Year) and outputs have included an annual international



conference which is a key dissemination activity for ET work. Sharing outputs with organisations and publications that have international reach is also evidenced. In 2013 and 2021 the Scottish approach was commended by the British Council for its global influence and impact on student outcomes, referencing ‘an integrated and inclusive sector that is outward looking with impressive international reach’ (2021, p. 5).

The Enhancement Themes Theory of Change assumed a long-term [impact on student learning experience and outcomes](#). There were fewer examples in the evidence to align to this outcome and this continues to be an area for future development of Enhancement Theme impact reporting. ELIR reports provided a description of *perceived* impact, such as:

*‘It is clear that developments across the University are already improving the day-to-day experiences of staff and students’ (ELIR 1)*

There are more examples where HEIs referred to a ‘likely’ or probable impact on student outcomes, but this was unevidenced or implied:

*‘The 2011-2014 Theme (Developing and Supporting the Curriculum) has likely resulted in more effective and engaging learning experiences for students’ (HEI)*

*‘The Enhancement Themes have contributed to the ongoing improvement of the quality of education provided to students across XXX and have likely positively impacted student outcomes such as academic achievement, employability, and overall satisfaction with their learning experience’ (HEI)*

Identifying evidenced impact on students who were not directly involved in Theme activity was therefore challenging beyond reporting activity and outputs. These quotes are some examples of coherent impact reporting of activities which were delivered/developed in alignment to the Themes which were more likely in the most recent Themes:

*‘The impact of the work on the previous Enhancement Theme - Student Transitions led to the development of the XXX Roadmap. The XXX Roadmap was developed to support students through the first 12 weeks of study pointing out key aspects of university life along the student journey. The Reflective Analysis identified that the institution has seen improved retention and progression of students and achievement of relevant institutional KPIs as a result of this work’ (ELIR 4)*

*‘In 2022, over 83% of feedback participants said they were likely to implement a change because of the workshop they attended. A further 94% (2021 and 2022) indicated that they would recommend the workshop to a friend. One 2022 participant wrote: “[the workshop] was informative and led me to think more critically about things I usually take for granted”. Essay writing workshops are consistently popular, one 2021 participant writing: “It was the most interesting workshop I have attended – changed my views on writing essays” (HEI)*

*‘This is an ongoing piece of research, but early data indicated a statistically significant impact on students who attended XXX workshops in terms of identifying with the discipline and adopting a deep approach to learning’ (HEI)*

*‘77% of respondents to feedback questions on the Transition to honours level study survey reported that they had found completing the tool useful for reflecting on their transition to honours study. Some qualitative feedback from all toolkits includes: “I feel a lot more confident about going into my honours courses” and “both reassured me and helped me understand the demands of transitioning to university study” (HEI)*

Some of the discussions were of the awareness (explicit or implicit) of changes made as a result of ET activity, for example, of new student feedback survey mechanisms or graduate attributes, and student awareness of initiatives was varied. Evidence included:

*'In discussions during ELIR, students demonstrated limited awareness of the graduate attribute terminology but, once the underlying principles were explained, were able to identify examples of having engaged in activities and experiences that indicated the attributes were, in fact, forming part of the student experience' (ELIR 3)*

*'Across the institution more widely, there are tangible improvements that have arisen because of the institutional engagement with the Enhancement Themes even though the origin of these innovations is not widely recognised' (ELIR 3)*

Positive student feedback on their satisfaction with ET related experiences was also reported:

*'At the local school level, for the Transitions Theme, 28 student and staff-led projects (across 14 schools and four professional service units) were funded by the University, demonstrating breadth of involvement both by discipline and across academic and professional services roles. Evidence of impact includes establishment of a Wellbeing Working Group and a new academic advising system. Survey results indicate the latter has improved student satisfaction with academic advice' (ELIR 4)*

*'XXXXXX' [a peer support system developed out of the Evidence for Enhancement Theme] successfully paired 218 students, with many students involved praising the idea' (HEI)*

The evaluation team did have access to sector-level student outcomes data, but it is difficult to make any direct causal connections between sector-level student outcomes data and the activity of the Enhancement Themes.

There was more evidence of impact on students who were directly involved in Theme activities, especially in later Themes such as Evidence for Enhancement. There were various examples of impact relating to engagement in further HE-related work, further study and employment. Some students involved in Theme-related internships were subsequently employed by their institution (for example, ongoing Learning and Teaching strategy development, student support roles). Other examples included student full-time officers continuing to work on a Race Equality Charter submission and a Student Minds' Mental Health Charter Award and others going into sector-related employment and further study. One example referenced the role of the Vice-President of the Student Unions' role and their subsequent appointment to the national board of QAA as an independent student member and co-chair of the advisory board. Similar impact of paid enhancement roles (Evidence for Enhancement Student Engagement Officer) included:

*'Students expressed that they liked their roles, felt supported throughout the process and enjoyed taking part in a wide range of tasks. Students emphasised that taking part in the initiative has been an excellent experience and they would like to continue working with staff. The most rewarding aspect that students valued was the opportunity to offer their perspectives on diverse staff projects. Students who engaged in this project found the experience useful as part of the CV when they subsequently graduated, as they had not had the opportunity to undertake internships during the pandemic. One student subsequently reflected on the experience offering useful evidence of their skills in an interview situation, when they subsequently secured graduate employment' (HEI)*

The Enhancement Themes Theory of Change also assumed a long-term impact on staff; those directly involved in Theme activity and the wider body of staff across the sector. There



was some evidence of staff being supportive of the ET agenda and how this enabled institutional change, but impact was clustered within the short and medium-term outcomes. There was much [more evidence of the direct impact on professional development for those involved in collaborative activities which connected disparate areas of work](#), and staff from various spaces and levels of experience, to develop lasting partnerships. This was noted across the sector as well as cross-institution, with the small size of the Scottish sector credited as the enabler of this impact:

*'Having that experience of other members of staff's approaches, other members of staff's outlooks or their perspective, I think has really helped me understand as a practitioner how I can then go on and impact the students that I work with and that's been really important to me' (HEI)*

*'The Themes' work has contributed to the fostering of a culture of enquiry, evidence gathering, and innovation, and the protection of time for staff roles. This has been particularly evident when we have championed the involvement of early career academics in leading and shaping the development and delivery of the Themes' (HEI)*

*'The Enhancement Themes lifted people's heads up from the day job...brought new people together and provided an accessible way to engage with new external developments... Enhancement Themes gave us time for play, funding for collaboration outwith the perceived confines of the institution' (HEI)*

Learning from others was suggested as providing both knowledge of HE for staff and affirmation of their place within it:

*'The Flexible Delivery Theme provided an opportunity for our staff (primarily through the programme leaders' forums which were established at that time by the Enhancement Theme lead and became the focus of much of the University's Enhancement Theme activity) to engage with the wider context in which higher education operates. Activity such as this cemented the importance of the Programme Leader role in driving innovative practice' (HEI)*

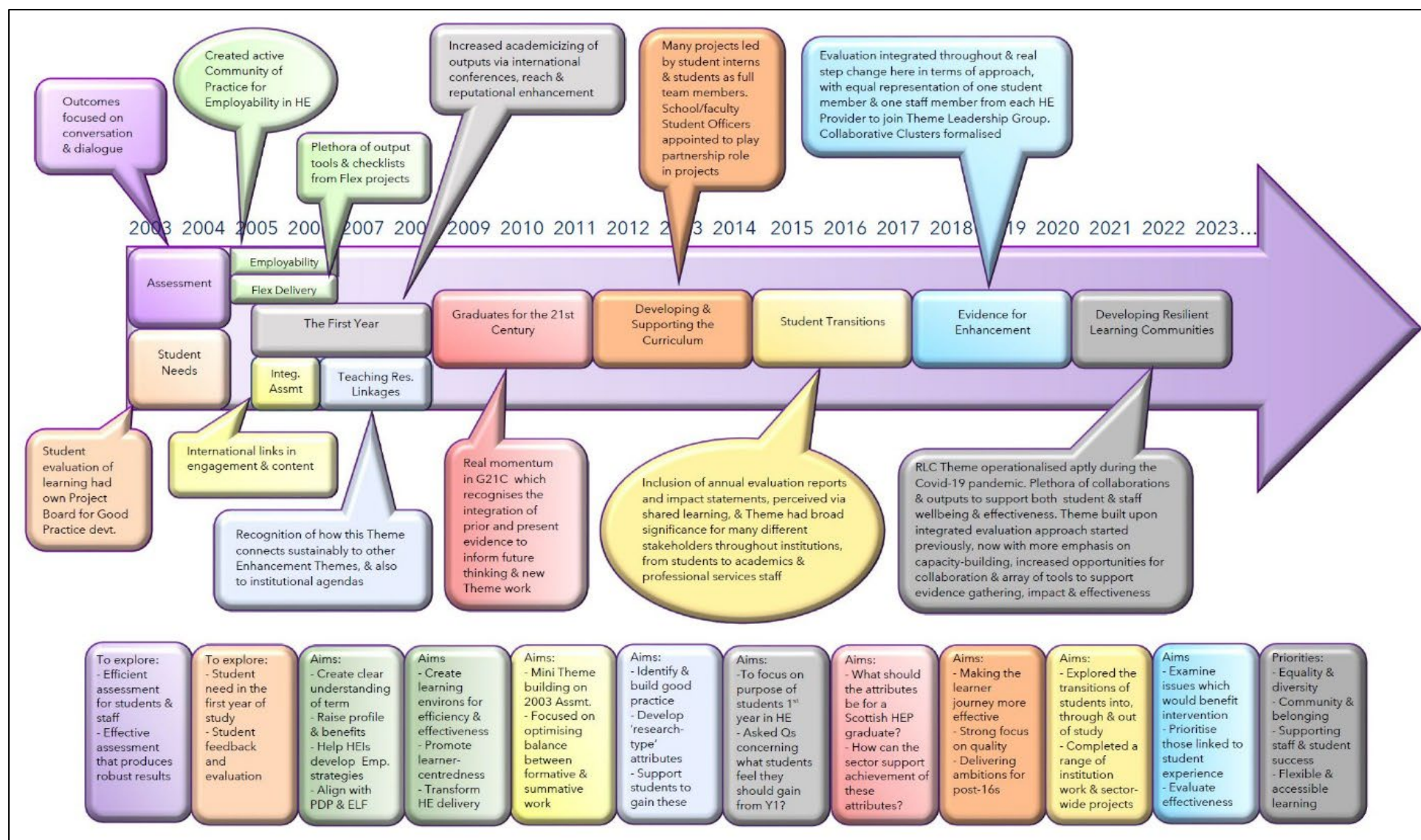
By 2008 (The First Year Theme), the increasing academicisation of outputs by influential scholars, in addition to cited examples of academic publication of Theme activity, could also indicate that there has been some professional gain from Theme engagement (LoE). In contrast, reflecting on staff engagement over the 20-year period, one key contact noted a risk which should be considered for the future:

*'Institutions report that engagement and mobilisation of staff and students at the scale required for effective Enhancement Theme activity can be challenging. Often those involved in the project work are repeat contributors who are personally interested in the particular Theme with others reporting that the work is controlled by a select few and that there are barriers to entry' (LoE)*

#### **4.4 20 Years of Enhancement Themes: a timeline of key aims, impacts, effectiveness and innovations**

The following diagram (figure 5 below) summarises the noteworthy achievements of the Themes over the past 20 years. Some of the approaches in evidencing achievement are highly innovative, especially given that there was no recognisably overt sector-wide evaluation landscape for many of these themes until 2014, starting with Student Transitions and continuing on until and, no doubt, beyond the present Theme.

**Figure 5: Timeline of key aims, impacts, effectiveness and innovations**



## 5 Evaluating the evaluation objectives

Whilst the primary reason for this evaluation concerns identifying impact upon the student experience over time, it is also prudent to assess whether the evaluation objectives have been met satisfactorily by the evaluation team.

Table 4 below outlines whether the evaluation's process objectives have been realised. The table outlines each objective agreed at the outset, typical activities undertaken in realisation of the objective, an assessment of the extent to which the objective has been met, and identification of key beneficiaries.

**Table 4: Analysis of evaluation realisation**

Stated objective	Typical activities	Judgement	Key beneficiaries
To undertake an integrative review of the Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme and 20 Years of Enhancement Themes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Documentary analysis over 20 years</li> <li>2. Gap mapping</li> <li>3. Expert Reference Group (ERG) input</li> <li>4. Additional data collection via Lines of Enquiry and evidencing via focus group events, questionnaire opportunities and conferences analysis</li> </ol>	Met fully - exceeded	QAA Scotland Scottish Funding Council Senior leaders in HEIs
To design, test and implement a Universal Evaluation Framework (UEF) for use within QAA Scotland's Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme, and beyond	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. UEF tool constructed and drawing upon recognisable gaps in evaluation practice</li> <li>2. UEF Pilot (x10 HEIs)</li> <li>3. Refinements designed</li> <li>4. Launched at 2023 QAAS Conference</li> </ol>	Met fully – exceeded See Austen and Jones-Devitt (2023) Evaluation for All? Why evaluation within and beyond higher education should be universal and accessible, <i>Open Scholarship of Teaching and Learning</i> , 2 (2), 55-69. At: <a href="http://doi.org/10.56230/osotl.56">http://doi.org/10.56230/osotl.56</a>	Evaluation practitioners in the sector Quality enhancement staff in HE Further access via QAA UK evaluation course
To provide evaluation capacity-building opportunities for all those involved in the Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Plethora of workshops</li> <li>2. Evaluation guides</li> <li>3. Digital outputs and web-based resources</li> <li>4. Drop-in sessions</li> </ol>	Met fully - exceeded	Evaluation practitioners in the sector Quality enhancement staff in HE TLG members

## 6 Conclusions

The Scottish sector has quite rightfully attracted the attention of others in the domain to the Enhancement Themes work, due primarily to the innovative approaches it has taken concerning enhancement in higher education. In focusing successfully on collaboration, engagement and inclusive representation, it has produced a sustained system of outputs, relationships, capability, trust and camaraderie – arguably unique within the domain.

These facets are evidenced by its contribution to the development of awareness, understanding and Theme engagement in staff and students within institutions and across the Scottish sector. Furthermore, the systems and processes created for disseminating, sharing of resources and collaborating can claim to be a key feature of the Scottish Enhancement Themes. Additionally, direct student involvement in Themes activity has clearly led to changes in institutional strategies, policies and practices across the Scottish sector.

There is strong evidence to indicate that the changing behaviours of institutions, the sector, staff and students has resulted in considerable enhancement in institutional strategy, policy and practice, alongside providing opportunity for meaningful personal and professional development of those directly involved in Themes activity. It can be concluded that the sum total of these contributions has led justifiably to a heightened reputation for thought-leading enhancement work in the Scottish HE Sector.

## 7 Evaluators' lessons learned

During the course of this longitudinal evaluation, there was significant learning, as follows.

- Piecing together a range of evaluative evidence over a 20-year period is problematic. This is especially pertinent when the language of evaluation, now taken for granted, was largely absent for much of the time across the wider HE sector. It is suggested that future evaluators take time to recognise the shifting context for evaluation in HE by looking carefully for implicit sources in addition to accessing overt reporting mechanisms.
- Getting the right balance between meeting the desired need for tangible evidence alongside respecting privacy of individuals is critical. Due to the 20-year timescale, many early participants had retired or were not contactable. Adopting clearly agreed ethical guidelines for work of this nature at the outset proved invaluable.
- Careful consideration of appropriate methodology is critical when undertaking this type of evaluation. The choice of contribution analysis as a conduit to examining retrospective evidence was crucial in gaining a meaningful and rigorous evaluation approach
- The focus taken by the evaluators to build capacity in those undertaking enhancement work has proven beneficial. There has been both a marked step change in the standards of reporting evidence and impact within institutions, alongside using such engagement to build trust and reciprocity
- Plan and agree the detail of the dissemination strategy at the earliest opportunity. One of the benefits of longitudinal evaluation concerns building trust and transparency between evaluators and commissioners. This should be built upon to ensure shared management of expectations throughout the process.
- Consider building in legacy at the earliest opportunity.

The evaluators ensured that, in providing capacity-building opportunities on a regular basis throughout this work, the work has resulted in developing and enhancing evaluative mindsets across the Scottish HE sector. Moreover, the development and nascent implementation of the Universal Evaluation Framework (UEF) means that there is a fully accessible tool which can be used for both planning effective evaluation design and gathering and inputting of evidence.



## 8 Recommendations

### 8.1 For staff and students

- The development of meaningful student engagement in Theme activity, Theme leadership and institutional strategic priorities should be continued whilst developing overall awareness in the wider student body.
- To continue to develop learning, a range of sources of expertise and advocacy should be sought and made accessible to Scottish staff and students.
- A strategy for resource creation and sponsored activity is necessary to ensure optimum impact.
- The ET should encourage and support the exploration of the impact of innovative practice on student experiences and outcomes.
- Engagement in the ET has the potential to benefit individuals' professional development. This can be a hook to engagement but must be balanced with institutional and sector priorities.

### 8.2 For institutions

- Making connections between Enhancement Themes should enable sustained and continuous learning within institutions and across the sector.
- Enhancement Theme activity should be clearly promoted and integrated at all levels within institutions to enable cross-institution awareness and avoid siloed engagement or pockets of activity.
- Institutions should continue to actively create a coherent infrastructure to enable the outcomes of the ET to be realised. Given the abundance of systems and processes for engagement, collaboration and sharing, it is recommended that these are evaluated to ensure effectiveness. Dedicated systems and processes for evaluation and impact reporting are also recommended as important additions.
- Institutions should continue to encourage the engagement of staff in the ET beyond the known and active engagers to further develop institutional enhancement cultures.
- Institutional and sector-level ET activity should be theorising how activities will impact on student outcomes and then measuring this theorised change against various student outcomes.
- Within the latest Theme analysis, evidence demonstrates that enhancement work should be aligned, or at least considered holistically, with wider strategic change (or refresh) at provider or sector level. This ensures that effectively 'proportionate' resources will be allocated accordingly. Moreover, senior leaders with wide spheres of influence will engage and thought-lead the importance concerning the rationale for change and accompanying interventions. This 'critical mass' approach can drive better engagement and impact, alongside resourcing.

### 8.3 For the Scottish sector

- The Themes should be created/structured so that longer-term impact assessment can be conducted and reported.
- Ensuring that ET activities align with institutional strategic priorities can make sure that activities and outputs are valued and then completed. However, alignment and integration of ET activity to strategy can impact on visibility of the ET and therefore



awareness, ownership and leadership are essential for reaching an effective critical mass at a sector level.

- Senior leaders should consider and agree meta evaluation processes at the outset to ensure conformity regarding the constituents of effectiveness at all strategic and operational levels.
- The ETs need to be inclusive of the experiences of all institutions to ensure relevance across the Scottish tertiary sector.
- Cross-sector enhancement activity should preserve the embedded ethos of collaboration and sharing of good practice.
- Given the abundance of systems and processes for engagement, collaboration and sharing, it is recommended that these are evaluated to ensure optimum effectiveness.
- The ET should encourage and support the exploration of the impact of innovative practice on student experiences and outcomes. Collaboration and sharing across the Scottish sector have benefited individual institutions and provides a robust rationale for informed institutional change. This is an important step in decision-making and should continue to be an aim of the ET.
- The Scottish sector has developed a reputation for enhancement which is admired and is globally influential. During a period of change in Scotland, the sector could consider learning from known international contacts concerning a tertiary approach.

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## Appendix 1: Evaluation protocol information for Expert Reference Group (ERG)

	<p><b>Evaluation of the Resilient Learning Communities and 20 Years of Enhancement Themes: evaluation protocol information for Expert Reference Group (ERG)</b></p>	
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The aim of this evaluation is to identify the impact of longitudinal Themes' activity on the student experience so that it is possible to identify ways in which the student experience has been improved, alongside recognising enhancements to policy and practice. The evaluation also aims to explore the implementation process of Themes work over the last 20 years.

### Evaluation objectives

- To undertake an integrative review (see below) of the Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme and 20 Years of Enhancement Themes.
- To design, test and implement a Universal Evaluation Framework (UEF) for use within QAA Scotland's Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme, and beyond.
- To provide evaluation capacity-building opportunities for all involved in the Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme.

### Methodology

This approach adapts an integrative review methodology which tests and build theory through an iterative process of evidence review and wider sectoral engagement (Coren and Fisher 2006, Austen et al 2016). This approach triangulates sources of evidence, iteratively sought, including from an Expert Reference Group.

### Evidence base

Evidence	20 Years of Enhancement Themes	Resilient Learning Communities
Documentary analysis of organisational (QAA Scotland) literature	x	x
Gap mapping of interventions and outcomes	x	
Contribution analyses of longitudinal gaps	x	
Primary research (methods TBC)		x
Stakeholder reflections on process and impact (1)		x
Expert Reference Group (2) reflections	x	x
UEF case studies (testing and piloting)		x

1 Consent will be secured for data to be used; ethical approval granted.

2 Consent will be secured for data to be used; ethical approval granted.

### Expert Reference Group (ERG)

This process offers ERG members the opportunity to share views and experiences on evaluation approaches across the Enhancement Theme/s. ERG members will be invited to participate in approximately 10 Steering Group meetings over the duration of the evaluation (three years). (N.B. Each meeting will be limited to 90 minutes' maximum duration, and we will aim to complete most within 60 minutes.) The discussion within these group meetings

will become data; hence part of the evidence base. ERG engagement will include critical appraisal of proposed review scope (protocol refinement), lines of enquiry, plans for testing, piloting and finalising the UEF, and draft reporting. In addition, the ERG will support dissemination, reach and reputation.

Indicative questions include: Is the proposed evidence-base collation proportionate to the aims and objectives? What is the counterfactual perspective and how is this considered? How can the evaluators build capacity and develop ownership of the UEF within the Themes work?

### **Outputs**

- A Universal Evaluation Framework for evaluating the impact of Themes activity on student experiences.
- Evaluation capacity-building resources.
- Interim and final reporting of findings.

## Appendix 2: A Theory of Change for the Scottish Enhancement Themes

### Overview

- A Theory of Change is a description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. The change that is expected to occur during the timeframe of each Enhancement Theme, and beyond, is outlined here.
- The long-term focus is student experience and student outcomes. This overview also documents the incremental changes in the knowledge and practices of engaged staff and students that should enable this long-term change to occur. This change is facilitated by administration and governance of the Themes at sector level.
- This Theory of Change will develop iteratively, but should be used to guide the decisions about new Enhancement Themes and how they will be evaluated. All Theories of Change require an associated evaluation plan outlining methods of measurement/understanding of effective process and impact aligned to these outcome statements.

### Context

The Enhancement Themes are a programme of activity that involves the entire higher education sector in Scotland. Staff and students at all levels can collaborate on one or more topics to improve strategy, policy and practice. The Enhancement Themes are a key component of Scotland's quality enhancement strategy. Whilst the work is coordinated by QAA Scotland, it is owned by the sector.

### Aims

- The Enhancement Themes aim to evidence:
- a) changes in student outcomes for students in HEIs and those working directly on Theme activity
  - b) exploring changes in the reputation and influence of the Scottish HE sector as a whole and individuals within it.

Enhancement Themes		
Sector Processes		
Inputs	Activities	Outputs
I1 Scottish Funding Council	A1 Institutional Theme-aligned work	O1 Theme governance/oversight meetings
I2 QAA Scotland staff costs and resource, sector governance and oversight	A2 Cross-institution collaborative clusters and projects	O2 Annual institutional reporting to QAAS
I3 HEI resource/staff costs as Theme leaders, project team members, contributors	A3 Student-led activities	O3 QAAS events and communications
I4 QAA costs for aligned work, including evaluation	A4 QAAS and institutional evaluation	O4 Published Theme resource for the website
		O5 Evaluation reporting

## Assumptions

- Collaboration between HEIs has a positive impact on students, staff, institutional and sector reputation
- Each set Theme resonates with, and is relevant to, all Scottish HEIs and all staff and students within
- HEIs are able to interpret each Theme to their local context
- Working alongside students and for students is central to all activity within the Theme
- QAAS facilitates opportunities for collaboration in inter-institutional Theme activity, and for sharing of knowledge and experiences arising from intra-institutional Theme activity
- The Themes are part of the Quality Enhancement Framework and there is an expectation that institutions engage with them
- There is an inclusive culture within the Themes work
- QAAS endorsement carries some weight to mobilise institutional activity
- Each Theme will appreciate the variety of ways to evidencing impact
- The Theme activity will directly impact on student outcomes

## **Disablers**

- Overwhelming resource generation dilutes impact
- Time, energy, commitment of HEI staff and students
- Engagement of staff beyond 'repeat contributors'
- Sector-wide policy/priority changes
- Competing institutional strategies
- External environment changes (for example, pandemic)
- Buy-in for embedding ET work and learning
- Rigid and inflexible HEI structures and systems (slow to change)
- Time from activity to impact (especially measurement of long-term impact)

## **Enablers**

- Commitment and ownership by HEI staff and students
- Embedded opportunities for engagement
- Shared goals and interests across the HE sector
- Alignment to HEI strategies and policies
- Simple processes and effective administration for HEI staff and students to engage
  - Facilitated spaces to meet online
  - Use of existing systems and processes (not creating new ones each Theme)
  - Organisation into strands of work for ease of management
  - Easy access to resources
- Student officer (and non-officer) engagement
- Staff engagement beyond those directly working on the Theme
- Fewer, more focused, activities within the Themes and institutional work



Enhancement Themes		
Outcomes: What will each Theme achieve?		
Long-term outcome (realising aims)		
<b>SECTOR</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• L1. Institutions adapt strategies, policies and practices based on learning from sector-led enhancement activity</li> <li>• L2. Scottish institutions are perceived as responding to changing environmental needs in higher education (student, staff, civic responsibility, and so on)</li> <li>• L3. The Scottish HE sector is influencing practices to enhance student experience and outcomes globally</li> </ul>	
	<b>Indirect</b>	<b>Direct</b>
<b>STUDENTS</b> (indirect/direct)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• L4. The learning experience and outcomes of all students studying within the Scottish higher education sector is improved and success is evidenced</li> <li>• L5. All students report an associated improvement in their sense of belonging to their institution and within the sector</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• L6. The learning experience and outcomes of students who directly engaged with the ET is improved and success is evidenced</li> <li>• L7. Students who directly engaged with the ET report an associated improvement in their sense of belonging to their institution and within the sector</li> </ul>
<b>STAFF</b> (indirect/direct)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• L8. All staff in Scottish institutions evidence an institutional commitment to enhancement and associated success</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• L9. Staff who directly engaged with the ET evidence a personal and professional commitment to enhancement and associated success</li> </ul>



Enhancement Themes		
Outcomes: What will each Theme achieve?		
Medium-term outcome (behaviour changes)		
SECTOR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• M1. The Scottish sector collectively learns from national and international practice to inform institutional and sector practice</li> </ul>	
<b>STUDENTS</b> (indirect/direct)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• M2. All students in Scottish institutions feel confident in reaching out to colleagues for support and guidance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• M3. Via their Theme engagement, students in Scottish institutions begin to use knowledge to innovate and explore what might work, or not work, in their context</li> <li>• M4. Via their Theme engagement, students in Scottish institutions develop, embed and scale the showcased ET work within their institutions</li> <li>• M5. Via their Theme engagement, students in Scottish institutions feel that their engagement in the ET is making a difference</li> </ul>
	Indirect	Direct
<b>STAFF</b> (indirect/direct)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• M6. All staff in Scottish institutions feel confident in reaching out to colleagues for support and guidance</li> <li>• M7. All staff in Scottish institutions feel supported in their mission to improve student experience and outcomes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• M8. Via their Theme engagement, staff in Scottish institutions begin to use knowledge to innovate and explore what might work, or not work, in their context</li> <li>• M9. Via their Theme engagement, staff in Scottish institutions develop, embed and scale the showcased ET work within their institutions</li> </ul>

Enhancement Themes	
Outcomes: What will each Theme achieve?	
Short-term outcome (awareness and understanding)	
SECTOR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• S1. Through consultation and learning, gaps in student outcomes and experiences are identified as in need of further enhancement</li> <li>• S2. A new Enhancement Theme is owned and promoted across the Scottish HE sector</li> <li>• S3. The sector agrees to a proportionate plan of work for the duration of the Theme</li> <li>• S4. Systems and processes are created for engagement, collaboration and sharing</li> </ul>
STUDENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• S5. All students in Scottish institutions become aware of, and some engage, in Theme-related activities</li> </ul>
STAFF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• S6. All staff in the Scottish institutions become aware of, and some engage, in Theme-related activities</li> </ul>
How change happens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through consultation and agreement, a new focus of sector-wide work is communicated</li> <li>• HEIs (staff and students) become aware and then engage in focused activity</li> <li>• Staff and students feel confident and supported in their enhancement goals</li> <li>• The outputs of ET activities are showcased and shared within institutions and the sector</li> <li>• Institutions adapt strategies, policies and practices</li> <li>• The learning experiences and outcomes of students are improved</li> <li>• The reputation and influence of the Scottish sector (collectively and individual contributions) to Themes work is enhanced</li> </ul>
<b>Notes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This theory of Change is evidenced-informed and has been co-constructed using the reflections of colleagues working within the Resilient Learning Communities Theme (2020-2023).</li> <li>• This resource has been created as part of the commissioned evaluation of the 20 Years of the Enhancement Themes and the Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme (Liz Austen and Stella Jones-Devitt 2022).</li> <li>• This Theory of Change could guide new Theme development and the evaluation of impact across Theme activity if used at the outset and throughout each Enhancement Theme.</li> </ul>	

## **Recommendations**

- All interventions within each Enhancement Theme should explicitly connect their activities to the long-term and/or intermediate outcomes of this overarching Theory of Change. This should be built into institutional planning and reporting.

## Appendix 3: Initial documentary analysis and evaluation of year 1 and year 2 RLC Theme institutional annual reports plus formulated lines of enquiry

	<p><b>Evaluation of the Resilient Learning Communities and 20 Years of Enhancement Themes:</b></p> <p><b>Initial documentary analysis and evaluation of year 1 and year 2 RLC Theme institutional annual reports plus formulated lines of enquiry</b></p>	
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### 1 Themes' documentary analysis – Evidence gap M<sup>4</sup>

	Evaluation indicator																								Overall rating <sup>5</sup>																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																	
Theme	Description				Change rationale				Possible difference				Measurement				Stakeholder judgement				Lessons learned				Curtailed or stopped				Unintended outcomes				Evaluation quality		Impact																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																							
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<sup>4</sup> The blocks, signifying levels of evaluation achievement are arranged from 1: minimal/none to 5: fully realised.

<sup>5</sup> The 'overall rating' block indicators in each of 2 domains concern quality and impact. Red – weaker, not realised. Amber – fair, partially realised. Green – strong, fully realised.

## 2 Themes' documentary analysis – commentaries and actions

Theme	Quality	Impact	Follow-Up Actions <sup>6 3</sup>
Assessment	No real evaluation objectives or recognition of its value as part of a change agenda.	Weak for discerning impact. Imagine there would be highly implicit impact but given the paucity of structure around the Theme approach, impossible to track and attribute directly.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Follow-up with authors' ( ) re impact if feasible.</li> <li>2. Follow-up wider contextual link concerning five-part framework (who?).</li> <li>3. Follow-up re ET Oversight Committee ( ).</li> <li>4. Examine 'spin off' work by in 2004.</li> </ol>
Student Needs	Fair but would be rated excellent if more explicit.	Fair with some tangible impact and may find out more re wider tracking via Project Officer.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Follow-up link and why outsourced?</li> <li>2. Contact editor ( ) if feasible.</li> <li>3. Follow up each project leader perspectives (x four)</li> <li>4. Follow up with Steering Group and Chair ( ) if feasible.</li> <li>5. Follow up with Project Officer ( ) if possible.</li> <li>6. Query why Australasian evidence used primarily</li> <li>7. Follow up resonance and outputs from 'National Conference'.</li> </ol>
Employability	Fair as great for content with some nods to evaluation.	Fair with some impact translated from 'lessons learned' into wish lists for actioning. Interested to see if the SFC-sponsored conference for impact took place?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Follow up with SG Chair ( ) if feasible.</li> <li>2. Follow up with who was the servicing QAA officer at the time.</li> <li>3. Find out more about the 'Learning to Work' model and the Effective Learning Framework (ELF).</li> <li>4. Explore whether SFC did fund more collaborative work and host an impact conference?</li> </ol>

<sup>6</sup> Follow-up actions are noted for the Evaluation Team when triangulating evidence to inform overall lines of enquiry.



			5. Potentially follow up the impact with the six sub-theme authors (some co-authors) of the related published outputs.
Flexible Delivery	Fair, with quite comprehensive evidence gathering but not framed evaluatively.	Fair - clearly some impact due to the volume of output tools, perspectives and checklists developed in projects.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Follow up with SG Chair ( ) about impact if feasible.</li> <li>2. Further light-touch perusal of spin-off materials/outputs and contact named project leads (or team members if leads no longer around in sector) to discuss possible impact. (These comprised: ).</li> <li>3. Follow up continued rationale for outsourcing of analysis (on this occasion via Critical Thinking group) and why the very diverse range of evidence melded – from personal vision/view by one of the sub-Theme authors through to pragmatic approaches like accessing Jisc/HEA resources.</li> <li>4. Did anyone review any subsequent access, RPL, degree outcomes, staff development and shift, new VLE development, and so on?</li> </ol>
Integrated Assessment	Weaker on evaluation quality. Lots of resources with implicit assumptions of use.	Weaker on impact. Documentation accessed does not show how these will come together coherently as tools for stakeholders to achieve impact.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Why no overarching plan for Theme? N.B. A Steering Group for all IA work is mentioned at end of each guide, along with an IA Network.</li> <li>2. Find out about the underlying discourse and key players and why there was an Australasian focus.</li> <li>3. Taking account of other stated actions, contact named authors from (then) Centre for Teaching, Learning and Assessment, to examine longer-term impact aspects.</li> </ol>
Res-T Linkages	Fair with some good sources accessed, although not entirely clear how choices for scoping were made beyond the project's two directors.	Fair with some recognition of translation and implementation difficulties; hence the call for further ongoing application and implementation...and, maybe, evaluation?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Explore impact with as Chair of the SG (and follow up with members of SG and institutional contacts referred to as evidence contributors).</li> <li>2. Consider relationship and inputs, nature of evidence contributed by ,</li> </ol>

			<p>[REDACTED]. Were they part of the project team?</p> <p>3. Find out about series of well-received sector-wide workshops and seminars at QAA and in various Scottish HEIs. The visitors were [REDACTED]</p> <p>4. Contact subject-specific project leads re longer-term impact.</p>
The First Year	Weaker evaluation quality. Not much information within overview report but may be missing rather than as a lacking approach.	Weaker on impact. Difficult to discern but 2007-08 Conferences might have added value via the Themes' intersectionality?	<p>1. Examine development of SHEEC as oversight committee for Enhancement Themes?</p> <p>2. Access the scoping paper referred to throughout the overview.</p> <p>3. Access two sector-wide discussion pieces, used in this Theme: [REDACTED]</p> <p>4. Obtain First Year Enhancement Theme 2007 and 2008 annual Enhancement Themes conference information – evidence and impact?</p> <p>5. Input of international experts in the first year of HE, [REDACTED]</p> <p>Any longer-term nuances?</p>
Graduates for 21st C	Fair as there is no explicit language of evaluation used but plenty of evidence presented aimed at strategic influencing.	Fair, and useful to follow up how the underpinning repository of resources were used within HEIs.	<p>1. Be interesting to examine the perceptual shift in integrated emphasis and how/why this was triggered?</p> <p>2. Follow up use of repository resources as conduit for change (key people involved in</p>

			<p>their construction named as [REDACTED]</p> <p>3. Map the active involvement of students during this Theme and beyond as appears to mark a step change?</p>
D & S Curriculum	Fair with good use of synthesised evidence to inform Theme in process and variety of heterogenous sources accessed and created across the Theme.	Fair and may be even stronger but impact of created resources appears black boxed (almost hidden within next Theme?)	<p>1. Explore some of the activities and approaches offered as part of the 10-year review point for the enhancement Themes' work.</p> <p>2. Contact project leads for impact trail assessment</p> <p>3. Check out [REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>one of several (including toolkit approach).</p> <p>4. <i>It will also be shaped by an external evaluation of the Theme process itself.</i> Presumably, this is the influence of the [REDACTED] report?</p>
Student Transitions	Fair with quite a thorough approach to gaining some kind of evaluation by using evidence directly to support.	Fair with really good attempt to address issues of impact and how captured and used to promote future thinking and integration. Would have been even stronger rating if offering support on contrasting types of impact and ideas on how to measure slippery concepts.	<p>1. Consider the [REDACTED] report in light of subsequent changes. Were these followed up and/or implemented?</p> <p>2. Examine further issues of reporting and how undertaken across institutions.</p> <p>3. Relationship of emerging tools in Themes and how embedded.</p> <p>4. Marks a shift in 'how to do...' and 'how to engage...' that is process underpinning the interventions in addition to content, per se (via generation of additional outputs); why and how did this repositioning come about? (Strategic or happenstance?)</p>
Evid. for Enhment	Excellent evaluation quality; although novel evaluation approach is claimed, it appears to build upon a culture shift from the prior Theme work (Transitions).	Fair for the 'actual' impact of the projects – again, loads of resources but uncertainty re how their impact is being garnered and shared.	<p>1. Explore claims about clusters and proportionality application.</p> <p>2. Review suite of recommendations mentioned in 7.3 of overview report to assess veracity and longevity.</p> <p>3. Consider whether capacity-building at outset is being given enough attention and consider</p>

			<p>whether we offer further training and development on using evidence for building confidence.</p> <p>4. Are students really engaged effectively?</p> <p>5. Should we examine whether less is more? Does the Theme notion need application of proportionality to be more effective?</p>
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### 3 Year 1 annual reports: Resilient Learning Communities Theme <sup>7</sup>

Institution	Quality	Impact	Follow-up actions <sup>8</sup>
various projects/activities.	There was a raft of really interesting projects; all focusing on student engagement and involvement. The evaluation is there across projects but implicit rather than evidenced fully. Some are ongoing, some completed, so this may strengthen as more finish their projects accordingly. Some actively recognise the importance of ownership in projects.	As per many projects, impact measures are not uppermost in the reporting, beyond that the participants anecdotally enjoyed the process and/or found it valuable with additional potential for expansion.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Considerable work needs doing to enable participants to recognise the value of front-loading their ideas (maybe ROTUR?)</li> <li>2. Support clearer outcomes statement with associated measures as none of the projects provided details of aims, objectives and how progress towards or exceeding these might be met.</li> <li>3. Develop evaluation of impact of resources and generally (use online guides).</li> <li>4. Requires considerable capacity-building with staff and students, that is discussion about what has been learned and disseminating as the pretext to next year's work – BUT – no real insight into impact and scaling at present.</li> </ol>
various projects/activities.	Good set of projects, some with very quick wins and outcomes and others with more intermediate and even longitudinal outcomes. Good use of a range of evidence sources and student engagement. Not sure how all projects cross referenced?	No real insights offered explicitly beyond getting the project completed, via a task accomplishment model. Felt like impact and coherence were somewhat disconnected in this early stage.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Examine the wider impact on the HEI in terms of reach?</li> <li>2. Assess consistency and efficacy of applying evaluation template. Consider using this new simplified one?</li> <li>3. Consider internal capacity for initiating these projects and how sustainable.</li> </ol>

<sup>7</sup> This table analyses the first year current Theme report from each HEI. Given the context of COVID-19, progress is understandably variable across the Theme and our analysis of evaluation should be treated as impressionistic at this stage.

<sup>8</sup> Follow-up actions are noted for the Evaluation Team to offer in support of HEIs.

<p>various projects/activities.</p>	<p><i>'Year 1 of this Enhancement Theme has been mainly concerned with benchmarking and identifying relevant activities, we are developing an evaluation strategy that will measure the impacts of projects within year 2 and 3 of the Theme'.</i></p> <p>This appears to be one of the few institutions to construct a measured and proportionate response, which is really good to see.</p>	<p>Good to see benchmarking informing impact measures for subsequent stages. Perhaps could have identified some process-based impact mechanisms now, rather than seeing impact as 'deferred' until later?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Offer support concerning range of impact measures that could be utilised.</li> </ol>
<p>various projects/activities</p>	<p><i>'Evaluation will be key to the project, and we will build in capacity for the [redacted] and partner organisations to track participant journeys, numbers and outcomes, create case studies and provide analysis to ensure the learning from each strand of the project is captured and responded to. The evaluation will ultimately be used to inform the content of the toolkit, ensuring it is fit for purpose.'</i></p> <p>The above is an extract from one of seven projects. Each one is discrete which suggests no overall strategy is in place presently that can be linked to proportionality and scale. Very difficult to discern how the majority of these projects address resilience in explicit ways beyond implicit notions of doing good work with vulnerable populations (perceptual). [redacted] discusses evidence in a more focused way.</p>	<p><i>'We will measure the impact through analysis of frequency of meetings, participation from different nations, participation by students from different groups including under-represented groups and feedback comments' AND (re lessons learned) 'Not as yet however the evaluation planned for early 2022 may highlight learning to take the project forward'.</i></p> <p>Views evaluation as added on presently <u>and</u> about participation/frequency of engagement rather than overall quality of achievement of any desired outcomes.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Support for developing impact measures and coherence.</li> <li>2. Support for thinking about evidence-based decision-making for planning interventions.</li> </ol>
<p>a study of student resilience and challenge during COVID-19 lockdown.</p>	<p>Really well-considered, evidenced and resourced project, which applies basic proportionality throughout and triangulates meaningful evidence with caveats around proxies.</p> <p><i>'Once the analysis phase is complete, we expect to be able to identify existing resources and approaches/strategies that can usefully be shared more widely. We also expect to be able to identify gaps, which we then hope to address through targeted interventions.'</i></p> <p>The team has used an expanded logic model and employed two PT Research Assistants and got</p>	<p>Very measured but circumspect approach, that is: <i>'For this particular Theme we established a core research group to lead on the development of the expert staff briefing, and the design and analysis of the questionnaires. We have found this approach to be of value, as it has ensured we have both subject and methodological expertise. Our researchers have involved the wider Team in all key decisions, thereby ensuring that there is a good balance of more focussed work and wider engagement.'</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Support for methods to capture slippery evidence of impact as well as stated proxies.</li> <li>2. Impact of Research Assistants?</li> <li>3. Considering wider impact mechanisms beyond the institution?</li> <li>4. Support with use of Guide to Basic Evaluation in planning next stages.</li> </ol>

	the whole thing through ethical approval prior to inception. N.B. Very strong level of seniority within enhancement team (professor-led). Really good understanding of baseline evidence and context (that is, the Theme team also cautions re reading too much into COVID-19 data per se).	Internal integration looks fine, with lots of touchpoints for reporting of impact. Just needs to be more explicit about intermediate phases for outcomes – focus is much more on outputs, that is really nice evidence-informed briefing paper for staff. Stated impact for reduced loneliness and isolation <i>'We are currently reviewing our Student Experience Strategy (SES), and we will capture some of the work of the Institutional Team within our actions and activities for the coming five-year period. As part of the SES review, we are considering approaches to measuring the (arguably) immeasurable aspects of enhancement initiatives, and any decisions arising through the SES review will also inform the approach of the Institutional Team.'</i>	
various projects/activities	Range of projects concerning micro-credentials, through to retention rates and 'happier students' (latter measured by...?). Typical of quite well-thought through ideas and all appear to be about retention as a proxy for resilience? Little thought yet given about more complex notions of impact beyond assumptions of rates, per se. Focus is on: <i>Direct entrants and enabling success through setting and delivering on expectations; Mentoring through activities such as 'supplemental instruction'; Blended learning, community and campus; Micro-credentials that enable successful student employment.</i>	Difficult to assess real impact yet as some outcomes not made explicit in projects. There is some understanding of measuring change (primarily retention rates and participating in projects) BUT not much concerning impact and routes to impact.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Explore how retention has a direct relationship with resilience per se.</li> <li>2. Support for methods to develop more complex measures/evidence of change.</li> <li>3. Support for establishing impact measures and overall coherence.</li> </ol>
various projects/activities (one overarching)	Overarching project with a range of data collection and consultation processes in place. Good coherence across the three areas, two of which are student-led. Also, really good use of interim reporting thus far and honesty. Intentional measures discussed but unintentional stuff not there yet. Set objectives comprise:	Good point raised about being proportionate in expectations (including impact): <i>'The main thing it is clear that needs to stop happening is the re-invention of the wheel...projects have shown that we need to dig deeper into the successful structures, communities, and peer mentoring projects that already exist and replicate/enhance where possible rather than starting again.'</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Support for methods to develop impact mechanisms throughout project in addition to those at the end.</li> </ol>



	<p>a) Focus on building the foundations: what does Student/Staff Learning Communities mean at [REDACTED] and how can we develop them.</p> <p>b) Addressing student loneliness and isolation.</p>		
[REDACTED] various projects/activities	<p>Fairly safe approach with most projects linked solely to raising awareness. Incremental approach, but in doing this, it appears to have missed a key part of ROTUR planning in considering who are key stakeholders from the outset. Projects comprise: [REDACTED]</p>	<p>Assortment of approaches, with no real coherence about reach and impact as yet. Lots about interesting social media dissemination, concerning reach, but very little concerning tangible impact in any of the projects. Slightly disjointed at this stage and engagement has been problematic in some cases.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Support for effective planning at outset</li> <li>2. Support for methods to develop measures/evidence of change.</li> <li>3. Support to understand impact (measurement, reach and sustainability).</li> </ol>
[REDACTED] various projects/activities	<p>Very process-based approach without contextual substance presently. Assumption is these 'projects' haven't yet got going fully to be effective. Objectives comprise: Gather examples of community building in the hybrid context and share examples; Support new activity - improve the experience for students with disabilities; Appoint a PhD Intern to support Theme work</p> <p>Rationale: <i>'This first year of Theme work has focussed on scoping as planned. The outputs of the PhD internships will shape our work in future years. We will consider if our approach of a small Institutional Team remains appropriate going forward, including how we continue to engage with other University activities, networks and groups accordingly, including the [REDACTED]. We will also reflect on the use of PhD internships to support Theme work as outlined above. Plans and reports are submitted to the Senate Quality Assurance Committee. We will also explore other mechanisms for sharing the headlines of our year 1 work in order to engage students and staff with our work on the Theme'.</i></p>	<p>No explicit discussion of impact at all as yet, so difficult to discern anything further at this stage.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Establish how much work has really been done as yet, as implied within the reporting.</li> <li>2. Support effective planning for impact and stake-holding as soon as feasible.</li> </ol>

Peer Enabled Activity	Evidence-based evaluation leading to guidance of what works / best practice to encourage scaling up. Good evaluation process in place.	Impact measures less well developed, but this could be relative to the stage of the project.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Support clearer outcome statement with associated measures (for example, how is 'strengthens student community and builds skills' and 'student engagement in peer enabled activity' going to be measured?)</li> <li>2. Support institution to focus on at-risk students with ethical and logistical considerations.</li> <li>3. Query: how much evidence is enough evidence? Do rationales for change need supporting references? 'it is clear that peer-enabled activity is a source of significant strength in promoting student engagement, student wellbeing and student success'.</li> <li>4. Develop evaluation of impact of for resources (guides).</li> <li>5. The benefit of participation for students is often assumed. Can this be included as an outcome at the outset?</li> </ol>
'Resilience in Action'	Three distinct projects linked to Theme outcomes. The rationale for change needs strengthening, but one project is the evaluation itself (longitudinal). Good to see this acknowledged but needs some more work.	Impact measures still need to be fully developed within the projects.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How to gather evidence for the design of the project/activity/impact (balancing political need/stakeholders and strategy) alongside support for the rationale?</li> <li>2. How is professional development, from Themes involvement, being evidenced, other than attendance and participation?</li> </ol>
various projects	Quality varies between the projects ( ) but they do tend to have strong aims and objectives and success criteria but weak measures of impact/ progress	All projects make this statement, which demonstrates that impact considerations are still a work in progress: <i>'In the short and medium term, formal and informal feedback channels will be utilised to determine the effectiveness of this project. Long-term markers are currently a point for further consideration.'</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Support the impact of resource creation.</li> <li>2. Support for measures beyond existing feedback and surveys, esp. long term.</li> </ol>
'Conversations'	Very good research-informed approach to understanding and applying the Theme to institutional context. Commended as they didn't rush to activity, as seen in some institutions. This is what year 1 should be about!!	Still awaiting a report of the findings to drive any concrete actions – this may be challenging given the complexity.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Support for developing actions from an extensive and complex evidence base.</li> </ol>

various projects	Planning for each project and a rationale (strategy) is well developed, but weaker proposed measurements of change.	There is a lot of proposed activity and outcomes for short and long term are developed. No evidence presented to date.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Support for methods to develop measures/evidence of change.</li> <li>2. Champion criticality and reflective practices.</li> <li>3. Explore how enhancement leads support evaluation of smaller projects.</li> <li>4. Impact of internships?</li> </ol>
various activities	Interesting approach (and different to many others) – not projects but discrete ‘activities’ (for example, guest lectures, meetings), local impact.	Various methods are proposed for capturing impact, on a project-by-project approach: <i>‘Evaluation methods will be specific to each project or event (for example, attendance at events and feedback from attendees, change in policy or practice at our institution, presentation of work at a conference)’.</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Explore how enhancement leads support evaluation of smaller projects.</li> <li>2. Support for methods to develop measures/evidence of change.</li> </ol>
various projects	Various projects ( ) with a range of evaluation measures in places.	Impact not realised presently through lag in implementation. Assume this work would take place anyway, without the Theme.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Support for methods to develop measures/evidence of change (beyond participation to account for change in behaviour).</li> </ol>
various projects	Interesting approach in which there is some recognition of intangible evidence emerging via the community of practice. Focused on a discursive process through a group which discusses initiatives, shares practice and examines areas of work related to Resilient Learning Communities at meetings scheduled every two months. Primary approach to evaluation includes staff and student surveys and focus groups.	Practitioner reflections are used as an account of impact so far, alongside a plethora of dissemination activities; hence more work needs to be done to track activity to impact.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Support for methods to develop measures/evidence of change.</li> </ol>

## 4 Year 2 annual reports: Resilient Learning Communities Theme

Institution	Description and overall evaluation quality	Impact	Follow-up actions
various projects/activities.	<p>Two primary activities have been reported upon (they are in process during this reporting and evaluation period) alongside one three-week short-term project which occurs over the summer break. These projects comprise:</p> <p>Some really interesting approaches and methods proposed. It would be useful to consider how outputs can inform and be aligned with outcomes.</p>	Difficult to discern directly as impact not explicitly mentioned; yet the notion of how informal learning might contribute to belonging in an impactful way is one worthy of further exploration in these projects.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consider Theory of Change (ToC) input to draw these projects together effectively and to consider longer-term sustainability.</li> <li>2. Access pathways to impact input to consider informal learning effectiveness.</li> <li>3. Examine how links can be made to prior work in Theme which are not explicitly linked in this reporting phase?</li> </ol>
various projects/activities.	<p>Lots of proposed changes linked to RLC Theme across a diverse range of projects (many new, start-up mini-projects). Three main projects strands, comprising:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resilient Learning Communities – Student Staff Collaborative Mini Projects</li> </ul> <p>Some bespoke evaluation appears to have occurred although interventions not reported yet explicitly against outcomes.</p>	There is some reporting in the public domain but there is also the need to ensure that ethics is gained across current ET work for wider sector interest.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Work requires support concerning meta-analysis to avoid fragmentation of emerging impact.</li> <li>2. Longitudinal aims and outcomes need to be stressed to avoid seeing projects as novelty and starting from scratch, rather than via evidence.</li> <li>3. ToC insight needed to link outcomes with evidence of effectiveness rather than via a myriad of activity.</li> </ol>
various projects/activities.	<p>Series of linked to the RLC Theme (some more tenuously linked than others to Theme).</p>	Very difficult to capture impact or plan for its gathering, due to absence in evaluation design at the outset.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Requires some input into ToC process to liberate from activities/outputs focus.</li> <li>2. needs to review the Learning Analytics project to consider who is interpreting the effectiveness of 'data' per se.</li> <li>3. Recognition of staff burnout provides opportunity to help demonstrate this is an intangible outcome that they can use now – not repurposed as part of a new 'Theme'.</li> </ol>

	<p>Also involved in three clusters, comprising:</p> <p>No recognition yet of the need for outcomes to be viewed as sovereign. Still tends to be outputs and activities-driven.</p>		
<p>various projects/activities</p>	<p>Activities and interventions are aligned with the three broader Theme objectives, comprising:</p> <p>Widening Access: To provide access to education for people from the widest range of backgrounds;</p> <p>Increasing Success: Once here, we aim to support all students in achieving their goals (personal, academic and professional) and to ensure a positive student experience;</p> <p>Enhancement Activity: We work collaboratively to support, evaluate and improve learning, teaching and support activity.</p> <p>Specific projects comprise:</p> <p>Direction of travel is very reassuring – should be moving to ‘excellent’ in next reporting cycle. Need</p>	<p>Some good partnership working and recognition that incorporating a feedback loop into evaluations can provide clear data as to how it is being used and its impact. Expect this to move to strong by next reporting cycle.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Actively encourage proposed evaluation processes and commitment. It will bring all kinds of associated benefit.</li> <li>2. Maybe support with notions of committing to stakeholder engagement in planning evaluation at outset.</li> <li>3. Access Pathways to Impact support?</li> </ol>

	to add in baselines and thresholds, wherever possible.		
<p>██████████ a study of student resilience and challenge during COVID-19 lockdown.</p>	<p>The overall purpose of the project is to explore student experiences of loneliness and isolation and identify strategies that may have been used, and may be used in the future to manage these experiences.</p> <p>This builds on evidence of loneliness amongst students pre-dating the pandemic which has variations depending on demographics (for example, level of study, subject of study, gender, age) and recent studies have shown that such experiences increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Conducted under the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Enhancement Theme 'Resilient Learning Communities'.</p> <p>The aim of this study was to better understand the experiences of social isolation and loneliness amongst students at ██████████ during 2020-21. A psychosocial approach was used with a mixed-methods research design. Data was generated through questionnaires and online focus groups and has informed the next phase accordingly.</p> <p>Exemplary approach and evidence-informed rationale throughout.</p>	<p>Clearly stated approaches to impact. Only additional comment concerns potential to articulate all of this into one Pathways of Impact process?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Congratulate the ██████████ on an exemplary approach and how reported. See if we could promote this approach via case study?</li> <li>2. See if ██████████ would be interested in piloting UEF.</li> <li>3. Access support re Pathways to Impact planning as an additional mechanism they could build in?</li> </ol>
<p>██████████ various projects/activities</p>	<p>Series of six activities and strands of work linked to the RLC Theme (some are more tenuously linked and/or haven't really started yet).</p> <p>██████████</p> <p>██████████</p> <p>██████████</p>	<p>Doesn't demonstrate real impact yet, although taking a more longitudinal approach than explicitly articulated at this point could yield considerable benefit and insight.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Keep focusing upon the need for outcomes that can be evidenced, that is captured or measured, rather than primarily using statements of intent.</li> <li>2. Ensure that ██████████ can build longevity into its evaluative approach rather than having short-term novel approaches.</li> <li>3. Encourage thinking about making activities explicitly relevant to the RLC Theme. For example, this could be a very fruitful area for the more established ██████████ project if longer-term outcomes were considered.</li> </ol>

	<p>Also involved in leading one cluster:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not much detail provided re progress and outputs.</li> </ul> <p>Fair approach, as there is some evidence of circumspection and wider engagement of students as tangible change-makers.</p>		
various projects/activities (one overarching)	<p>The approach is mixed; some projects build on prior Theme work whilst some are novel interventions. There were four projects reported upon, comprising:</p> <p>Lots of interesting activities reported, yet this work needs to focus on outcomes and overall coherence.</p>	Due to lack of outcomes focus, it is very difficult to discern impact beyond activity levels at this stage.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consider ToC approach to help develop an outcomes focus.</li> <li>2. Requires some input regarding how evidence is captured across the Theme</li> <li>3. Access support regarding Pathways to Impact planning.</li> </ol>
various projects/activities	<p>projects appear to be newly developed across the year and it appears that many are still in relatively early stages of inception. Several areas were identified, and these include five relatively nascent projects at varying scale, comprising:</p>	No real sense yet of impact – especially as many projects are in early stages – and how these projects form part of the bigger impact of the RLC Theme.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. ToC approach might be useful in helping to recognise difference between outputs and outcomes when designing evaluation of projects.</li> </ol>



	<p>Some good use of scoping to inform project starting points but not much detail on evaluation approaches and how progress will be assessed beyond producing outputs.</p>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Need to develop understanding of baselines and/or comparator approaches in many of the projects.</li> <li>3. Access support re Pathways to Impact planning.</li> </ol>
various interventions	<p>Several interventions (rather than projects, per se) are described which build an infrastructure for ET work, comprising:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appointing two PhD Interns to support Theme work and new activity</li> <li>• Sharing good practice examples</li> <li>• Progressing specific recommendations from the 2020-21 PhD Internships.</li> </ul> <p>Brilliant application of ToC to theme areas and ambitions.</p>	Really great to see impact statement aligning fully with outcomes within the ToC.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Request use of ToC from [redacted] as an exemplar of good practice for others.</li> <li>2. Consider whether the [redacted] PhD interns would be willing to share this practice at one of the wider staff development sessions.</li> <li>3. University to consider how wider staff engagement could be cultivated within this community of practice approach, that is maybe removing any schism between students and organisational learners?</li> </ol>
Two main projects	<p>The work informing this phase has been crystallised into two evidence-informed strands or workstreams, comprising:</p> <p>Really strong approach to building on evidence-informed processes to extend and triangulate with Themes' work successfully.</p>	Good to see some impact already being built upon. Useful to consider proportionality at outset when planning project impact in some areas.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Highlight the evidence-informed, refined approach as a model of good practice.</li> <li>2. Examine proportionality considerations at design stage for ensuring wider sustainability?</li> </ol>

<p>various projects/ interventions</p>	<p>The approach provides an interesting mix of short, mid and long-term strategies. Specifically, seven projects have been running in year 2, comprising:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> </ul> <p>Really comprehensive approach, and great to see evaluation incorporated at design stage.</p>	<p>As impact is planned in from the outset, much of it is fulfilled accordingly. Only caveat concerns gaining more baseline measures at outset for ease of capturing effectiveness at later points.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Team is congratulated on exemplar reporting. Explore willingness to pilot UEF as part of their evaluation approach.</li> <li>2. Consider support for baseline capturing.</li> <li>3. Be great to see the longitudinal evaluation process as potential exemplar for sharing regarding further Themes work.</li> </ol>
<p>various projects</p>	<p>The University has paused most of its RLC ET work in year 2 and has identified the following five projects to be undertaken in year 3, comprising:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■</li> </ul> <p>Nothing yet implemented fully so difficult to discern evaluation effectiveness due to being at early planning stages.</p>	<p>Due to minimal implementation and lack of further detail concerning progress, projects' impacts can't yet be assessed fully.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Encourage the University ET Team to develop supportive governance structures to ensure efficacy of any proposed projects.</li> <li>2. Consider how outcomes can be strategically aligned to overarching Theme.</li> <li>3. Model some ToC approaches in the University so that envisaged projects can develop appropriate outcomes and impact mechanisms.</li> </ol>
	<p>Year 2 has focused on refining activities from several areas into one:</p>	<p>Huge potential for considering impact both within and outside of . Consider integrating a Pathways to Impact process.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Explore whether could pilot the UEF.</li> <li>2. Consider work around impact pathways.</li> </ol>

Resilience	<p>Great to see that evidence-informed decision-making is at the heart of the ET work.</p>		3. Examine whether evaluative approach could provide useful case study evidence.
various projects and new strand: 'Future of Teaching, Learning and Assessment'	<p>One new Theme strand has emerged which consolidates many of the other strands, the new project comprises:</p> <p>Whilst several are continuing:</p> <p>Interesting perspective using institutional data, disaggregated within projects; hence, interested to know how proxies will be used effectively.</p>	The existing work is clearly linked to the University's strategic ambitions and impact re implementing QA/QE policy.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consider making the link stronger between project activity and the RLC theme. Useful to align more closely with overall Theme outcomes.</li> <li>2. should consider effective student engagement which goes beyond established governance processes.</li> <li>3. to consider what is business as usual re their QE agenda and what is unique within the context of the RLC Theme; moreover, how they can contribute any rich learning beyond own institution.</li> </ol>
various activities/projects	<p>A range of activities is articulated in this report of both a short and longer-term nature. Listed projects (n. eight) comprise:</p>	This would easily be rated in the 'strong' section if the measurable activities were evidenced for overall effectiveness as outcomes, which could then drive impact.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. to keep assessing progress against overarching theme outcomes to drive effectiveness and impact.</li> <li>2. More evidence-scoping at the point of intervention design might be useful to help prioritise resourcing of interventions.</li> <li>3. Having outcomes to assess for effectiveness, rather than activity-engagement measures, would really help. ToC input might assist these notions.</li> </ol>



	<p>Across the projects reported, there is an impressive array of evidence triangulated and rigour of applying the learning across all.</p>		
<p>several strands of activity</p>	<p>There have been several strands of work undertaken by [REDACTED], comprising three primary projects:</p> <p>If the evidencing impact framework begins to be applied across all ET activity, this will soon be deemed an excellent process.</p>	<p>Looking forward to seeing use of EI Model to determine impact across all projects.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consider whether [REDACTED] can showcase EI Model for other ET HEIs.</li> <li>2. Consider turning process evaluation into tangible outcomes.</li> <li>3. Follow up the collaborative work to identify whether wider impact can be demonstrated.</li> </ol>
<p>range of activities</p>	<p>A range of activities at different scales were offered, comprising:</p> <p>Some attempt to use data and triangulation but no real baselines established yet from which to evaluate progress fully and systematically.</p>	<p>Impact of some work is discussed and ongoing plans for considering it are mentioned, especially concerning the [REDACTED] project.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consider moving from a sole focus on activities, per se, to giving attention to baselines, outcomes and ToC.</li> <li>2. Impact pathways application might be useful.</li> <li>3. Consider process evaluation mechanisms for longitudinal work.</li> </ol>

Overall:

- Some great evaluation work from [REDACTED].
- Additionally, there are some promising evaluation ideas explored by [REDACTED].
- Weakly aligned, minimal progress and/or unfocused reports submitted by [REDACTED].

## 5 Year 3 overall reports: Resilient Learning Communities Theme – HEIs and clusters

HEI or cluster	Most positive aspect in RLC Theme three-year period	Overall evaluation quality	Impact	Follow-up actions
Xxxxx	The most positive aspect does not relate to a single project, but rather the collective impact and atmosphere created by the sum of all the projects. These have made a significant impact across the [REDACTED] and the wider sector, reflected by broad dissemination through publications (five, including a Wonkhe blog on resilience and a book chapter on widening participation), conference presentations (17), posters (nine) and Theme Leaders Group webinars (two).	Lovely, well-evidenced and integrated approach demonstrated.	Comprehensive approach to impact planning, measuring and using relevant activities to highlight effectiveness.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Using the experience of this Theme and created channels (like [REDACTED] projects, co-created design and planning) which facilitated wider staff and student engagement, to escalate viable and effective engagement mechanisms.</li> <li>2. Continuing to longitudinally track the effects of the RLC Theme in relation to explicit student outcomes where possible.</li> </ol>
Xxxxx	The integrated and coherent focus on retention through Diagnostics, Micro-credentials and Student Success Officers which culminated in [REDACTED]	Fair reporting of process-based successes in terms of engagement and would like to see assessment of progress against set RLC project objectives	Really strong impact demonstrated against key RLC priorities; especially concerning partnership dissemination work	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. As well as rightly reporting against positive outcomes, the ET work will be richer in both the University and sector if you consider reporting</li> </ol>

	██████████ to bring fresh impetus to ██████████.	which were not included in the reporting.	across sector and including international uptake.	<p>unintended or even less successful outcomes and indicating why these have occurred from a non-blaming perspective.</p> <p>2. When reporting ET projects against outcomes and impact measures, it would be really useful to demonstrate progress in these domains by reporting the 'distance travelled' since baseline measures were taken within projects. Presumably, baselines were recorded across all projects to demonstrate possible enhancement?</p> <p>3. Given that you believe that there are some triumphal areas within the ██████████ initiatives which have emerged, it would be really useful to focus upon sharing these successes across the sector in a variety of dissemination mechanisms which go beyond conferencing (or at least tracking wider impact, post conference exposure).</p>
Xxxxxx	Breadth of initiatives that have enhanced resilience among our learning communities. Some of which have focused on specific	The summary at the end of this report provides a powerful testament to ways the Themes are joined up across the years	There is clearly considerable attention given to dissemination and role played in impact and you quite rightly identify	<p>1. Is there a 'chicken and egg' perspective with ET work that needs to be acknowledged? For example, does the ET</p>



	<p>approaches that translate across the University, and others have addressed contextualised learning settings and specific learner groups. Finally, some initiatives have had immediate and specific impact, whilst others have an incremental and cascading impact – see, for example, positive focus on AI, which is expanded to a cross-university working group.</p>	<p>and – most importantly – influence and are influenced by strategic imperatives.</p>	<p>communication as a key conduit. To extend impact opportunities further, consider other ways impact can be achieved and how measured.</p>	<p>work drive strategic change or is your need for strategic change driving ET. Does this provide limitations or opportunities?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Your summary provides a lovely crystallisation of how important longitudinal thinking can be for making useful change at institutional level. Perhaps consider using an institutional ToC process to ensure that a range of short, mid and longer-term outcomes can be identified prior to embarking on Themes work?</li> <li>3. There is a range of impact pathways, mechanisms and types that could support your drive for effective dissemination. Perhaps useful to visit impact aspects which go beyond communication when disseminating?</li> </ol>
Xxxx	<p>That the learning from current community-building good practice will inform a guide which will be used beyond the life of the Theme. This will support wider work across the institution in building community and sense of belonging.</p>	<p>Strong reporting on outputs and good to see original ToC approaches mentioned. Did you consider how the reporting against ToC outcomes might be done within Themes timeframe?</p>	<p>Loads of generated outputs and clearly there is considerable potential for impact. How will/are you tracking impact?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How are you reporting ToC evidence of progress against outcomes? Assuming that you have identified tangible mechanisms for measuring change from baselines?</li> <li>2. Think about spheres of influence as a mechanism for wider engagement, rather than about communication,</li> </ol>

				<p>per se. For example, how could you engage very senior staff in supporting the impact of the PhD intern work across the University?</p> <p>3. Similarly, consider how the Guides produced can be tracked for via a variety of impact mechanisms. For example, what is the impact of the Teaching matters blog, beyond it being read?</p>
Xxxxx	<p>The single most positive aspect over the three-year period has been the development and implementation of [REDACTED] new student-focused curriculum enhancement framework, [REDACTED]. This innovative framework has transformed the educational landscape at [REDACTED] by providing a systematic and consistent approach to inclusive curriculum design and enhancement.</p>	<p>Really fair evaluation processes across an array of activities. Perhaps consider application of an institution-wide ToC to consolidate all these activities and projects.</p>	<p>You are clearly on an upwards journey concerning recognising impact and relevant communities which need to engage and drive both reach and influence.</p>	<p>1. How will you turn the mini-project momentum into tangible and scalable interventions? Have you considered using an institutional ToC in which to house such meta-analysis?</p> <p>2. It is significant that the two areas achieving considerable impact concern development of the [REDACTED] framework and the [REDACTED]. These appear to act as a hub to feed activity into. Have you thought about how you will use these networks to drive further engagement and strategic alignment in future ET work?</p> <p>3. Given that a strength of this report concerns use of objectives alongside stated measurements, have you evidenced these stated</p>

				ambitions? For example, can you now see positive movement from any baselines within the measures and how (or have) these been reported?
Xxxxx	The Resilient Learning Communities Theme was the right theme for the right time as we emerged from COVID. The hitherto 'challenging to explain' Theme title suddenly came to life as a term that could accommodate the many facets of post-pandemic practice: the way our staff pulled together; the critical requirement to understand the wider student experience; and the need to focus on the health and wellbeing of our students as they found their feet in the wake of the pandemic.	Really great to see levels and types of evidence given strong consideration within the context of a disruptive period for the sector.	Brilliant to see supportive development processes and an array of impact tools used when planning impact, not just reporting it. Leads to strong trajectory for further work ahead.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Whether the notion of 'critical mass' when evaluating interventions is something of interest to the wider sector? For example, is it something that evaluation researchers could interrogate and/or research further when considering both effectiveness as proportionality?</li> <li>2. The tension between fire-fighting and evaluating is well made. Could strategic approaches to proportionality help with this matter?</li> <li>3. Do you see new ways of working as needing distinct appraisal before considering wider adoption, could these be integrated in an incremental manner, or is this dependent on the nature of the new working process?</li> </ol>
Xxxxx	The most valuable aspect of our work over the past three years has been the engagement of student consultants to co-lead project work. This was embedded within our year 3 work on our	Very interesting account which highlights the successes, challenges, and actions taken, when moving from distributed to institutional engagement.	The construction and deployment of an institutional ET resource hub sounds very promising. Useful to track uptake and engagement in the generated resources, per se.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Whether you can build impact tracking into the nascent ET Resources Hub you have developed? That way, you can work out the scalable nature and effectiveness for</li> </ol>

	<p>preparing for [REDACTED] project building upon the success of the role in other enhancement projects and something we shall continue to take forward for institutional enhancement work.</p>			<p>the institution and its component parts.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. The [REDACTED] model sounds great and pleased to see that you are scaling it upwards. Have you considered added value mechanisms for the students engagement beyond financial?</li> <li>3. The move during the course of RLC, which recognised the added impact and effectiveness of going from a distributed ET process to one with institutional governance, should be considered as a starting point for any new ET work. If harnessed with an effective ToC process, this could give you really strong outcomes and impact if applied consistently.</li> </ol>
Xxxxx	<p>The most positive, cross-cutting change is the emergence of new peer networks and collaborative spaces, backed by core support and resources.</p>	<p>A very robust approach is presented which recognises lessons learned along the way but also focuses in on whether objectives have been achieved in an evidence-informed way.</p>	<p>There has clearly been considerable impact both within [REDACTED] across Theme projects and in external partnership working. This is supplemented by recognising that the use of ToC processes will enhance the impact and trajectory of further ET work.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How to increase engagement by using proportionality mechanisms within your ToC planning phases.</li> <li>2. Whether something is lost, in addition to all that is learned, via the reporting of ET interventions as they become more diffuse yet interconnected. Again, this conundrum might be useful to bring to ToC processes.</li> </ol>

				3. Further scaling actions for the plethora of mini-projects coming to fruition as an effective mechanism for broader engagement? That is, use the evidence of the mini-project as a starting point for larger-scale strategic intervention involving more stakeholders?
Xxxxx	Partnership working across various agencies, addressing various areas of disparity for particular student populations. [REDACTED] has gained further experience in co-creation and better understanding of what works and what must be developed to meaningfully advance evaluation practices within context. Supported via participation in the QAA universal evaluation framework pilot and Building Confidence in Using Data and Evidence programme.	Real trajectory and insights demonstrated which bode well for future Themes work.	Very astute understanding that impact recognition is linked strongly with enhanced capability and resourcing.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The nascent role dedicated to the ETs appears crucial in making the most of effective planning and impact. Useful to evaluate role impact critically over the next Theme period to sustain, and potentially expand, upon this positive starting point.</li> <li>2. Within both role and organisation, consider the part played by capacity-building in developing effective continuous improvement mechanisms.</li> <li>3. Given your type of institution, feed into any future-facing ET governance processes within the sector to ensure that the widest engagement and representation considerations are acknowledged, and their effectiveness considered (especially concerning student involvement at sector level).</li> </ol>

Xxxxx	Adopting a robust research-based approach built around one major project. This has resulted in multiple outputs and findings which have already led to three related and highly successful projects conducted during Years 2 and 3 (and detailed in this report). Project findings have also identified a core common theme around the importance of 'Building Community,' and this strand of work is being further developed with staff and students across [REDACTED] on an ongoing basis.	Exemplary reporting which highlights strong use of evidence to inform intervention progress, per se, alongside influencing connections with other strategic imperatives.	Excellent impact approaches which drive connections and ensure sustainability of projects beyond obvious lifecycle.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Building on the evaluation research skills of the immediate ET projects team to develop proportionate capacity in others.</li> <li>2. Really emphasising the added value of seeing ET interventions holistically when planning. For example, it appears that the RLC work was enhanced considerably by considering alongside development of the Student Experience Strategy. Perhaps useful to map possible areas of parallel yet related development for future Themes' work?</li> <li>3. Why the Loneliness focus ironically led to institutional isolation? Given that one might expect this to be of considerable interest in the sector, perhaps revisit reasons for apparent lack of take-up across HEIs in sector? That is, dissemination effectiveness, timing, and so on?</li> </ol>
Xxxxx	The efficacy of the facilitated Action Learning Set model as an autonomy-supportive process to aid individual development and group cohesion.	Interesting use of coaching as key methodology. Challenge is to translate individual foci into tangible strategic imperatives.	Given the nature of the methodology, dissemination (as reported) and wider strategic impact planning will be more challenging.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Whether an individually focused methodology is wholly fit for purpose when considering strategic impact and adoption?</li> </ol>

				<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. How can the process of non-directive coaching be turned into tangible outcomes which go beyond describing the coaching mechanisms, per se? That is, what else were you trying to achieve beyond letting the individual identify their own resilience approaches and actions? Also, how does this link with relative social capital levels of said individuals, if trying to scale effectively?</li> <li>3. Perhaps consider whether you could have achieved more, or same, by taking more heterogenous methodological approaches that could have been compared for effectiveness?</li> </ol>
Xxxxx	Impact of the overall [REDACTED] project roll-out on the student experience at [REDACTED] evidenced by latest student feedback metrics.	This is a strong exemplar of a comprehensive approach, which encompassed key facets of evaluation. The recognition concerning getting the infrastructure right, in order to enable success, is very telling.	Robust mechanisms and impact outcomes are reported. The link with large-scale strategic projects, and the importance of including all key stakeholders in designing the work, has produced some telling impact. Especially pertinent to enhanced student experience.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Taking the really impressive learning about developing the right strategic infrastructure into all future Themes' work. The recognition that institutional work needs to have significant and appropriate resourcing in order to yield results is one that the rest of the sector could take on board too.</li> <li>2. Building on your approach to both inclusion (by utilising appropriate structures as</li> </ol>



				<p>defined in 1 above) and capturing evidence so that improvements can be demonstrated effectively. (Great to see an independent evaluator used to give impetus to veracity and engagement).</p> <p>3. Examining a 'chicken and egg' scenario: did most of the work described become effective <i>because</i> it was aligned with work already identified as imperative, or did the RLC Theme give the impetus to designing <i>new</i> strategic work accordingly? We anticipate it was probably a bit of both.</p>
Xxxxx	Sense of partnership and belonging nurtured by the development of rich opportunities for students to build and engage in learning communities (both within ET work and beyond).	Provides an honest and circumspect account with real commitment to continuous improvement and derived learning from experience and evidence, rather than guesswork.	Although not all projects fell into this impact category, The trajectory of the longitudinal [REDACTED] project, and its continuing resourcing based on evidence, provides a great exemplar of strong impact.	<p>1. Consider solely having longitudinal projects with scaled year-on-year objectives and outcomes in order to enhance effectiveness rather than a plethora of shorter projects.</p> <p>2. The need for communications being integrated from the outset needs to be factored in across all ET work as it appears crucial for success.</p> <p>3. The systematic approach suggested, utilising ToC mechanisms throughout, alongside sustaining the continuing development of</p>

				capacity-building, bodes well for driving really effective Themes work in the future.
Xxxxx	Collaboration with students, in particular the student interns. They provided unique insights and were extremely motivated. They accomplished a remarkable body of important work that has impacted practice and policy at our institution.	Great to see an evidence-informed perspective throughout, alongside meaningful deployment of student input.	The impact tracking against outputs is very strong alongside interesting use of more creative methods for impact capture; that is, longitudinal storytelling.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Whether you could use a Theory of Change (ToC) process to ensure that longitudinal gains reported from RLC are fed into future objective-setting.</li> <li>2. Think about wider impact pathways that go beyond outputs. There has clearly been a variety of impact mechanisms and processes which you could gather. For example, what is the impact upon the skills development and employability gains for the student interns?</li> <li>3. The value of a heterogenous core group appears pivotal for your sustained success. Perhaps consider contingency planning which expects and accommodates Team changes at the outset?</li> </ol>
Xxxxx	Timing of the Theme means outcomes can inform the University's new Learning and Teaching Strategy which is due to be published in late 2023.	Much of what has been said could be rated as fair across the Theme; however, what rates this as much stronger concerns recognition that evaluation, evidence and engagement go hand-in-hand. In year 3, you have a good grip of what is required to	As you have mentioned, the impact trajectory should now follow from putting proper evaluation support in place from the outset. This will give you an impact trajectory for all future Themes work.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Use the awareness that a range of methodologies increases engagement within all future work.</li> <li>2. The engagement of senior leaders as key stakeholders is pivotal for most institutional enhancement work. Good to see that this has been noticed</li> </ol>

		evaluate effectively and confidently for future work.		<p>explicitly and should be factored into all ET work and its evaluation.</p> <p>3. The significance of timing and coordinating with strategic refresh (in this case your learning and teaching strategy) is interesting. In further ET planning it might be useful to also consider other areas of strategic policy-making and whether planning Themes work needs to be mindful of this to exploit maximum impact potential?</p>
Xxxxx	Our work around the new Theme site has worked as an accelerator for all the projects and is a legacy resource that will grow, providing more benefit. The SharePoint Repository, accessible to staff and students, acts as a hub for information on the current and historic themes. Alongside, guidance and advice are provided on topics including applications, project management and effective evaluation – with exemplars (simultaneously sharing best practice with other colleagues).	You have certainly developed both thinking and insight about how to make Themes work more effectively during the RLC process. The mechanisms you are suggesting should really move [REDACTED] to an excellent level of evaluation approach in future work.	Again, the suggested changes bode well for ensuring that impact is captured and utilised effectively. The SharePoint Repository sounds like it will provide a positive step change for further work.	<p>1. Now you have real momentum, please use the UEF and other tools as needs dictate to drive the 'baked-in first' approach to evaluation planning. It really does increase effectiveness.</p> <p>2. Great to see that the University has underpinned the ET work with more resourcing. Maybe use this principle to drive wider scale in further new work?</p> <p>3. The repository sounds great. Use something like the impact matrix to measure and gauge reach when putting items on there. Hence, that way you can keep tracking effectiveness and impact.</p>

Xxxxx	<p>A really successful [REDACTED] project which has brought together a research team that will continue beyond the three years of the Theme. We will continue to run events and evaluate the impact of these on staff practices. We are already talking about further research and then linking the outcome of this to other university initiatives. This feels like such a step change in terms of Theme activities for us.</p>	<p>You are clearly able to recognise key factors that will assist even better evaluation of the Themes in future. Many of the challenges faced concerning time, prioritisation and sustainability would be alleviated if a ToC was used at the outset.</p>	<p>Great to see the amount of work that has gone into producing well-designed resources and outputs within this Theme. Consider what outcomes are required from these, which will then enable you to track their impact robustly and sustainably.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Using Theory of Change (ToC) processes in future Themes' work, which would mitigate the strain of challenging engagement issues as identified in the report. For example, by including key stakeholders at the outset, you could apply a 'what's in it for me' lens in framing objectives. That way, you are more likely to get wider engagement if colleagues can see possible benefits of their involvement explicitly.</li> <li>2. It is really great to see that positive changes to practice have been reported. What do these look like and how can they be scaled across the institution?</li> <li>3. The report notes that a key positive concerns the development of <i>professional networks and communities of practice...that will last beyond the Theme</i>. What conditions caused this to occur and how can these be replicated?</li> </ol>
Xxxxx	<p>Creation of a new peer-enabled activity team, and significantly increased take-up of peer-enabled learning opportunities across disciplinary areas.</p>	<p>The role of data in enhancing decision-making is considered throughout this report and good to see that a longitudinal approach is recognised as critical. Perhaps</p>	<p>The comments concerning demonstrating benefits to engage wider staff involvement are well considered. How else, beyond scale, can you demonstrate</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consider whether you should be data-driven OR data-informed? For example, how does the data triangulate with wider forms of evidence</li> </ol>

		useful to consider going beyond data to consider wider evidencing when thinking strategically, rather than operationally?	impact linked directly to the RLC Theme?	<p>concerning an array of stakeholder perspectives?</p> <p>2. Do you need to accept the notion of short timeframe for ET work? You could build on prior ET evidence to align Themes work closely with a more longitudinal approach. Hence, the trajectory can move beyond three years.</p> <p>3. Your comment about difficulties in engaging staff is consistent with those faced by many providers. Given that you have a relatively new team, perhaps consider ways to undertake evaluation proportionate to the available resourcing? If staff had basic evaluation skills, which you could help deliver, perhaps they could design in effectiveness within their activities at the outset rather than viewing as onerous bolted-on dependencies? Your role could be to guide and support in less complex areas of provision, freeing you up for more complex interventions and strategic planning?</p>
Cluster	The wide range of organisations willing to be part of the Network, their attendance at meetings and	Given there doesn't appear to have been any explicit evaluation planning, it is very hard to know	There was clearly tangible professional development impact for those attending on behalf of	<p>1. Embarking on a Theory of Change (ToC) process prior to full engagement in activity-</p>

	involvement in the discussion, demonstrate that the Network provided an effective platform for engaging with our stakeholders, although students were less well represented.	what the expected outcomes were and how the Cluster work intended to meet these.	their respective organisations. It is less clear how other impact pathways were considered and/or adopted.	<p>focused cluster work. This is arguably essential, given the multiple stakeholders and potentially competing aims which need translating into shared and measurable outcomes.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Working with sparqs representatives at senior level to determine how to gain effective student engagement.</li> <li>3. Sharing of outputs is a very short-term process-based impact which is worthy of reporting and then needs follow-up tracking. For example, tangible impact of outputs in a meaningful manner concerns a more longitudinal analysis of take-up and changes in practice, strategy and influence on student outcomes to demonstrate effectiveness.</li> </ol>
Cluster	The [REDACTED] community of practice will continue to be the most positive element as we have already agreed to continue working beyond this summer. The Community of Practice (CoP) provides a space for broader questions to be considered without the complicating factors of institutional pressures.	Clearly there is a certain level of effectiveness, or the partnership would not agree to go beyond its funding timescale. Slightly stymied by not having clear outcomes and expectations set at the start of the project by funders.	Interesting critique provided regarding impact, which appears to vary dependent on non-controlled HEI factors (many outside of cluster's immediate remit). Nonetheless, some strong output tools and wider sectoral engagement.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Whether there could be more structured planning at the outset? For example, should there be a minimum threshold for engagement of senior leaders engagement?</li> <li>2. You could implement a ToC with all potential stakeholders at the outset. Although this might appear laborious, it would reap many gains which</li> </ol>

				<p>would save time upstream and could produce greater effectiveness concerning: shared evaluation methods, possible outcomes, equitable working arrangements, shared vision/common purpose, maximising impact pathways.</p> <p>3. Did you conduct any work to find out why students didn't engage? For example, are there some meaningful incentives for engagement that could be applied?</p>
Cluster	<p>Across the three years of the RLC Theme, the successive [REDACTED] have taken very different approaches to their outputs. Year 1 was a conference; year 2 was primarily text-based resources; and year 3 has had an emphasis on creative outputs. As a consequence, the overall range of resources should speak to a broad spectrum of users. In year 3, the photography output, in particular, has the scope to engage people beyond the traditional stakeholders and has the potential to be a deceptively powerful piece.</p>	<p>Well-documented reporting which highlights essential process-based effectiveness.</p>	<p>Loads of outputs which clearly form a tangible contribution, per se. It would be very useful to track take-up (as indicated) but also to then follow up regarding wider student outcomes concerning confidence, attainment and employability.</p>	<p>1. Do the [REDACTED] projects always have to be outputs-led? Probably prudent to start with what outcomes you intend to address, and how to measure success in meeting those outcomes and then consider which activities – including outputs development – would be most effective.</p> <p>2. How will capacity to undertake evaluation of Student-Led work be built in these projects? For example, there are many tools and resources on both the ET site and on sparqs that could be used.</p> <p>3. How useful, or otherwise, is it to start new projects each year, rather than to design one longitudinally with</p>





				effective stages in each academic year?
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Overall:

- **Assessing ‘critical mass’ when planning enhancement work.** This requires insight regarding whether specific ‘Themes-type’ work can be aligned, or at least considered holistically, with wider strategic change.
- **Using ToC approaches for sustainable effectiveness and impact.** Throughout the submitted evidence, more effectiveness was demonstrated when enhancement work had been planned, implemented and monitored using ToC-type processes which engaged heterogenous stakeholder decision-making.
- **Reporting and sharing of impact not output.** A common theme in the analysed work concerns the need to reframe outputs dissemination into one which considers impact of enhancement work. Considering the purposive nature of produced work in relation to student outcomes, especially longitudinal, and then applying impact pathway approaches would be more beneficial.

## 6 Initial documentary analysis and evaluation of year 1 and year 2 RLC Theme institutional annual reports plus formulated Lines of Enquiry

	<b>QAA Scotland: Themes' Evaluation - Formative Lines of Enquiry (August 2021)</b>	
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### Context:

The following lines of enquiry are formed from documentary analysis of all Themes' overview reports (and perusal of related ancillary outputs) alongside annual reporting of year 1 of the *Resilient Learning Communities* work. Information in these documents were analysed via a systematic evaluation extraction pro forma (Appendix 4) after which the evaluators independently analysed the emerging lines and triangulated these ideas accordingly. These ideas have now been translated, by means of speculative but reasoned hypothesis, into workable lines of enquiry we wish to pursue. Five key areas emerged, comprising: Theme engagement, modelling of evidence and impact measures, methodological guidance, capacity-building of evaluative mindsets, and future-proofing.

### Theme engagement:

- Whether the framing of a single institutional 'project' across the Theme is more coherent than a multiplicity of projects?
- Examining primary driver(s) of the listed projects: responding primarily to Theme or institutional strategy?
- How primary foci are prioritised to maintain effectiveness?
- Extent to which proportionate, and incremental, project plans (including evaluation) are utilised?
- Assessing effectiveness of stakeholder engagement, especially students?

### Modelling of evidence and impact measures:

- Measuring the impact of resources creation?
- Measuring the impact of student partnerships/student internships?
- Measuring the impact of Theme engagement on professional development?

### Methodological guidance:

- Use of evidence to create a project rationale and how that differs from evidence for impact?
- Exploring the difference between project outputs and project outcomes?
- Developing effective measures of progress and success?
- Understanding the importance of ethics, bias, criticality and reflections within approaches to the Enhancement Theme?
- Extent to which project impact over time is known?

#### Capacity-building of evaluative mindsets:

- Building capacity to assure a sustainable approach?
- Examining whether the language of evaluation presents a barrier for capacity-building?
- Exploring organisational skills and capabilities needed to make evaluation more effective?

#### Future-proofing:

- Applying proportionality: do organisations need to be doing less to be more effective?
- Whether the timing of Themes effects impact measurement?
- Considering the interrelationship and congruence between Themes already evidenced and whether outcomes are used effectively to drive future planning?
- Assessing the impact of moving from assurance to enhancement via governance and strategy?

Stella Jones-Devitt and Liz Austen, August 2021

## Appendix 4: Evaluation extraction form (adapted from Saks and Allsop, 2019)

Type of output/source:		Review date:	
Title of project/activity:			
Author(s):		Publication date:	
Publisher:		Place of publication:	
What change has been/is being made? (Brief description(s) or overall activity/intervention)			
Why the change needs to occur. (Rationale for the change)			
What difference has occurred/will hopefully occur as a result? (Tangible change made successfully or envisaged)			
How do we/will we know? (How the change is measured)			
Who has been/is involved in making any judgements? (Who decides on effectiveness)			
Any lessons learned/to apply? (Applied ongoing learning)			
Any things stopped/need to stop doing? (Any unsuccessful elements)			
Any unintended or less tangible outcomes acknowledged?			
Own notes, including up to three key themes/aspects:			
Rating? Quality of overall evaluation approach (including levels of evidence; proportionality; scale; strategic influence) - A. Excellent, B. Fair, C. Weaker		Rating: Impact assessment – 1. Strong, 2. Some, 3. Minimal	
A		1	
B		2	
C		3	
Actions for evaluation research team:			

## Appendix 5: Focus group schedule for institutional conversations

### Ethics

Participation in this evaluation is voluntary. If your institution does decide to participate, you may decide to withdraw from the project at any point without giving a reason. Your input will remain confidential to the evaluation. Whilst reference will be made to 'discussion with staff and students', no individual staff member, student or institution will be identifiable in the analysis or reporting of these discussions. If you have concerns regarding this approach, please contact Liz Austen via SCoLPP (Staffordshire Centre of Learning and Pedagogic Practice) by emailing: [scolpp@staffs.ac.uk](mailto:scolpp@staffs.ac.uk)

### Questions

Thinking about the 20 years of the Enhancement Themes and your involvement within them (Assessment, Student Need, Employability, Flexible Delivery, Integrative Assessment, Research-Teaching Linkages, The First Year, Graduates for the 21st Century, Developing and Supporting the Curriculum, Student Transitions, Evidence for Enhancement, Resilient Learning Communities), please consider the following questions:

#### 1. Do you know of specific evidence of the impact of Theme activity on student learning experiences and student outcomes in your institution?

In your reflections, consider students who have been directly involved in Themes' activity and the wider student body. This evidence could include:

- Due to Theme related activity, you perceive that students feel more confident in reaching out to colleagues for support and guidance. *Evidence example: Reflections of academics who delivered a revised Student Induction Programme as part of the Student Transitions Theme.*
- Via direct Theme engagement, you can evidence that students in Scottish institutions began to use knowledge to innovate and explore what might work, or not work, in their context. This could include developing, embedding, and scaling the showcased ET work within institutions and they know that their engagement in the ET is making a difference, or did. *Evidence example: Student X was employed as an Intern during the Evidence for Enhancement Theme, presented at the annual Learning and Teaching conference and has reflected on the impact this had on them.*
- Due to Theme-related activity, the learning experience and outcomes of students studying within the Scottish higher education sector is improved and success is evidenced. *Evidence example: Institutional data for students who engaged in a Peer Mentoring Programme as part of the Developing and Supporting the Curriculum Theme showed better outcomes than those who did not participate.*
- Via direct Theme engagement, the learning experience and outcomes of students studying within the Scottish higher education sector is improved and success is evidenced. *Evidence example: Student X played a key role in the co-design of an intervention to enhance student employability as part of the Graduates for the 21st Century Theme. They are now working in highly skilled employment and credit this experience as influential.*
- Due to Theme-related activity, students report/ed an associated improvement in their sense of belonging to their institution and within the sector. *Evidence example: Institutional pre and post survey for a Resilient Learning Communities extracurricula intervention evidences a change in belonging.*

- Via direct Theme engagement, students report an associated improvement in their sense of belonging to their institution and within the sector. *Evidence example: Reflections from student leaders who were engaged in Research-Teaching Linkages Theme literature reviewing with staff partners.*
- 2. Were there any other outcomes of the Themes' work (for example, on students, staff, institutional strategies, policies and practices, in the Scottish HE sector collectively, or the international HE sector)?**

This could include:

- Through sharing of resources and collaborating in Themes activity, the Scottish sector collectively learns from national and international practice to inform institutional and sector practice. *Evidence example: Cross-sector working during the Student Transitions Theme led to the implementation of a successful micro-credentials programme for first year students.*
- Your institution has adapted strategies, policies and practices based on learning from sector-led enhancement activity. *Evidence example: Resources produced from the Assessment Theme directly influenced a new Learning, Teaching and Assessment Framework and associated assessment designs.*
- Due to Theme-related activity, Scottish institutions are perceived as responding to changing environmental needs in higher education (student, staff, civic responsibility, and so on). *Evidence example: The institutional work conducted during the Flexible Delivery Theme has been praised by sector bodies responsible for fair access.*
- Due to Theme-related activity, the Scottish HE sector is influencing practices to enhance student experience and outcomes globally. *Evidence example: International connections made between institutions during the First Year Theme have continued post Theme and have positively influenced practices in both institutions.*

Please consider both qualitative and quantitative evidence, which could include reflections from practitioners, those responsible for strategic change, and from students themselves.

## Appendix 6: End-of-year reporting



### End of year 1 report for

The key purposes of this report are to:

- provide a framework for HEIs to report on their Theme activity that has taken place over the year
- help share information across the sector on the benefits and challenges around Theme engagement.

Please report under the headings below. The report should be about 6 to 8 sides of A4 in length.

#### **Institutional team**

Identify any changes in Theme leadership, TLG and institutional team membership since details were reported in the institutional plan developed at the start of the academic year.

#### **Evaluation of activities/outcomes**

To make evaluation processes more accessible and user friendly, we have attempted to simplify (not minimise) the evaluation reporting process into seven key questions (see below). Prior to completing these, it would be useful to refer to the QAAS website resource: [A Guide to Basic Evaluation in HE](#) (specifically, Section 8, Summary overview on page 23, and the Evaluation Checklist – Appendix A, on pages 28-29).

Please report each activity/intervention against the following questions in the Evaluation part of the template.

N. B. You may have already realised some of your objectives and/or these might be ongoing, so please delineate each question according to whether activities or interventions have been completed already in this reporting year or are in process. (Easiest way is to delete **either/or** options highlighted in **red** in questions below):

### **Evaluation**

Please complete the following seven questions for each activity or intervention (N.B. Just cut and paste the table below as many times as necessary).

<b>Title of project/activity</b>	
1.	What change <b>has been / is being</b> made? (Brief description(s) of overall activity/intervention)
2.	Why <b>have we made / are we making</b> it? (Rationale for the change)
3.	What difference <b>has occurred / will hopefully occur</b> as a result? (Tangible change made successfully or envisaged)
4.	How <b>do we / will we</b> know? (How is the change measured)
5.	Who <b>has been / is</b> involved in making any judgements? (Who decides on effectiveness)
6.	Any lessons learned to apply already? (Applied ongoing learning)
7.	Any things you <b>have stopped / need to stop</b> doing? (Any unsuccessful elements)

<p><b>Dissemination of work</b></p> <p>Which mechanisms have been most effective in disseminating outcomes and resources internally, and to the sector? Please provide examples.</p> <p>If there are materials and resources you can share with the sector, please provide details below.</p>

<p><b>Collaboration outwith your institution</b></p> <p>How have you collaborated with other institutions? This could be informally by growing networks or contacts, or more formally, for example, through collaborative clusters or sector work. If you have been collaborating with others, briefly explain what this has involved and what have been the benefits and challenges.</p>

<p><b>Supporting staff and student engagement</b></p> <p>How have staff and students been supported to engage in Theme activities? Please provide examples.</p>

<p><b>Processes</b></p> <p>What are you learning from the processes, approaches and structures you are using to support this Theme?</p> <p>How will this report be used/distributed within your institution?</p>



<b>Report author(s):</b>	
<b>Date:</b>	



## End of year 2 report

The key purposes of this report are to:

- provide a framework for HEIs to report on their Theme activity that has taken place over the year
- help share information across the sector on the benefits and challenges around Theme engagement.

Please report under the headings below. The report should be about 6 to 8 sides of A4 in length.

<b>Institutional team</b>		
Identify any changes in Theme leadership, TLG and institutional team membership since details were reported in the institutional plan developed at the start of the academic year.		
Role	Role holder	Change during year

## Evaluation

Please complete the following seven questions for each activity or intervention (N.B. Just cut and paste the table below as many times as necessary).

Title of project/activity	
1.	What change has been made? (Brief description(s) of overall activity/intervention)
2.	Why have we made it? (Rationale for the change)
3.	What difference has occurred as a result? (Tangible change made successfully or envisaged)
4.	How do we know? (How is the change measured)
5.	Who is involved in making any judgements? (Who decides on effectiveness)
6.	Any lessons learned to apply already? (Applied ongoing learning)

7. Any things you need to stop doing? (Any unsuccessful elements)

**Dissemination of work**

Which mechanisms have been most effective in disseminating outcomes and resources internally, and to the sector? Please provide examples.

If there are materials and resources you can share with the sector, please provide details below.

**Collaboration outwith your institution**

How have you collaborated with other institutions? This could be informally by growing networks or contacts, or more formally, for example, through collaborative clusters or sector work. If you have been collaborating with others, briefly explain what this has involved and what have been the benefits and challenges.

**Supporting staff and student engagement**

How have staff and students been supported to engage in Theme activities? Please provide examples.

**Processes**

What are you learning from the processes, approaches and structures you are using to support this Theme?

How will this report be used/distributed within your institution?

**Looking ahead**

In session 2022-23 we will be starting to consider what the next Enhancement Theme might focus on. We are interested in knowing about the discussions, hot topics and issues that are emerging in your practice and gaining increasing attention. Please share your thoughts and views below.

**Report  
author(s):**

**Date:**



## End of year 3 report for: Choose an item.

### Guidance notes (for deletion upon submission)

The key purposes of this report are to:

- Provide means to evidence and reflect on activity across the three-year duration of the current Theme
- Consider the contribution evidence of shorter duration project/activities
- Help share evidence-informed information across the sector on successful and effective activity
- Reflect upon what has been challenging.

You should aim to write this report as a collective endeavour (particularly for institutional reporting where a number of projects may have been delivered) as triangulation of evidence and experiences will provide a more powerful and useful narrative.

Please consider evidenced activity across the duration of your activities:

- for institutions, this is evidence gathered over three years
- for collaborative clusters, this could involve evidence gathered over two or three years
- for the Student-Led Project, please report evidence on the project delivered in year 3 of the Theme
- for QAAS-managed projects, this will be evidence across three years.

Please report under the headings below. The report should be succinct and well-evidenced throughout, using the reporting templates, questions and headings provided to shape your responses.

Table 1: Evidencing effectiveness and reporting impact						
Cumulative descriptor of institutional/ cluster/Student-Led Project activity over RLC Theme period	<a href="#">Which overarching RLC Theme questions (1-5) were prioritised?</a>	Evidence of effectiveness in addressing chosen RLC theme priorities	Suggested outcomes and impact measures used to assess effectiveness (refer to Theory of Change model)	Challenges	Made most difference?	Hindsight

When considering information provided in Table 1:

- What is the ONE most positive aspect to report over the three-year period? (Evidence of effectiveness column and Suggested outcomes and impact column)
- What is the most challenging issue? (Challenges column)
- What has made the most difference and why? (Made most difference column)
- What would you NOT do again, in hindsight, and why? (Hindsight column)

Table 2: Ways of working/engaging in the Resilient Learning Communities Themes work					
Theme process	Activities description	Positive aspects/ difference made	Challenges	Changes made during process	Hindsight - could be improved by:
Supporting staff and students to engage with Theme activity					
Effectiveness of organisational and management structures					
Evaluating activity and projects					
Disseminating outcomes and findings internally and externally					
Collaborating with other institutions/other organisations					

- Which ONE process from each of those listed within the Theme processes column in Table 2 worked best? (Activities description and Positive aspects columns)
- Why was it the best? (Positive aspects/difference made column)
- Which was most difficult and why? (Challenges column)
- Why did you make any changes? (Could be reported as Positive or via Challenges column)
- What would you NOT do again, in hindsight, and why? (Hindsight column)

<b>Report author:</b>	
<b>Date:</b>	

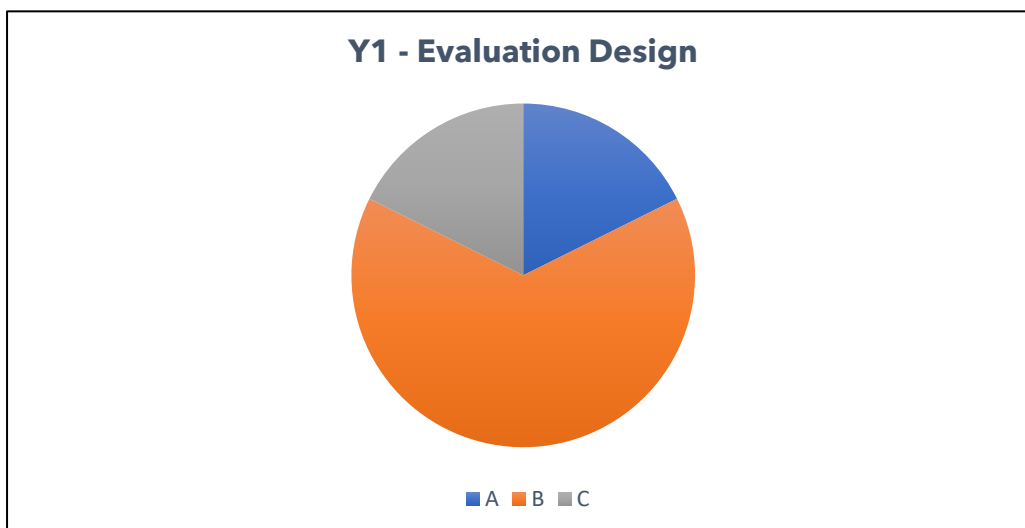
## Appendix 7: Overview RLC evaluation reports

	Overview: RLC Evaluation reports	
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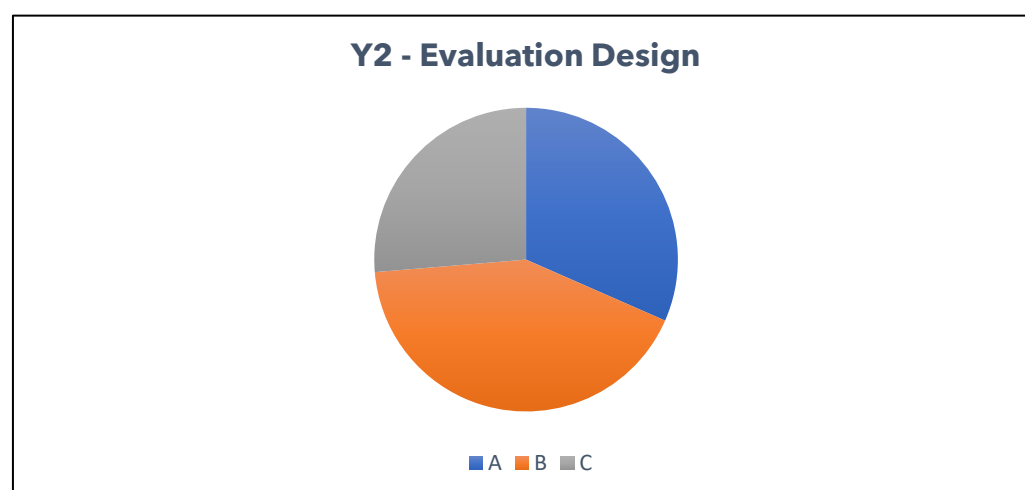
### Context

Ratings of institutions' evaluation reports were carried out by the Evaluation Team in each year for all institutional submissions. This uses a modified version of the Saks and Allsop data extraction process on each occasion for consistency, with minor changes to the year 3 reporting to accommodate cumulative evidence. The submissions across each year were also then sampled and moderated accordingly. Data is presented across two rated facets: overall **evaluation design** year 1, year 2 and year 3; and **impact assessment** year 1, 2, and 3. An explanatory narrative and overall RLC analysis accompany the diagrams accordingly.

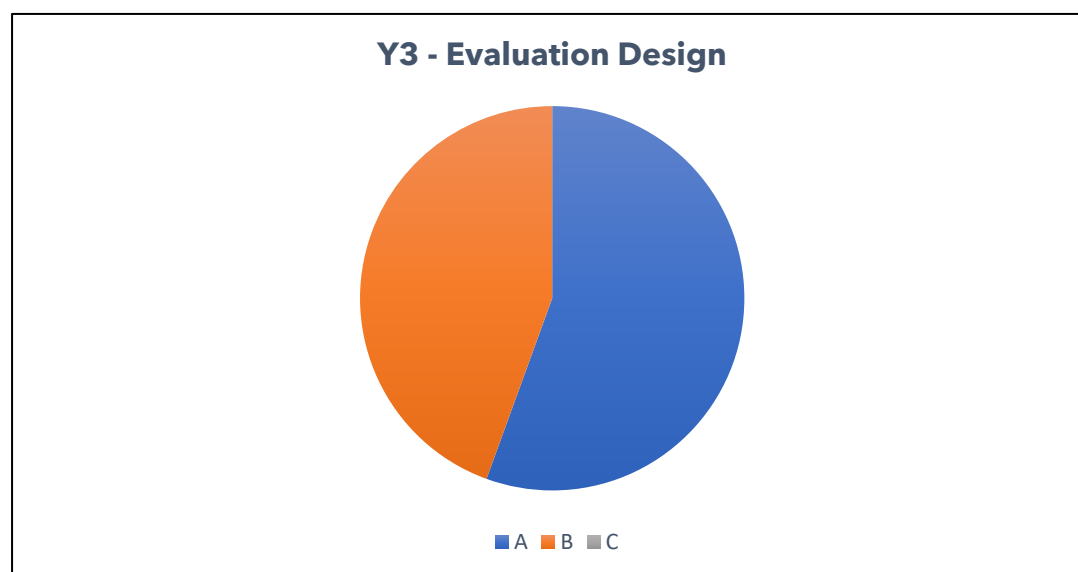
### Evaluation design



Analysis of year 1 reports (n. 17) submitted concerning quality of overall evaluation design highlighted that 18% were rated as Excellent (A. Blue), 64% were rated as Fair (B. Orange) with 18% rated as weaker (C. Grey).

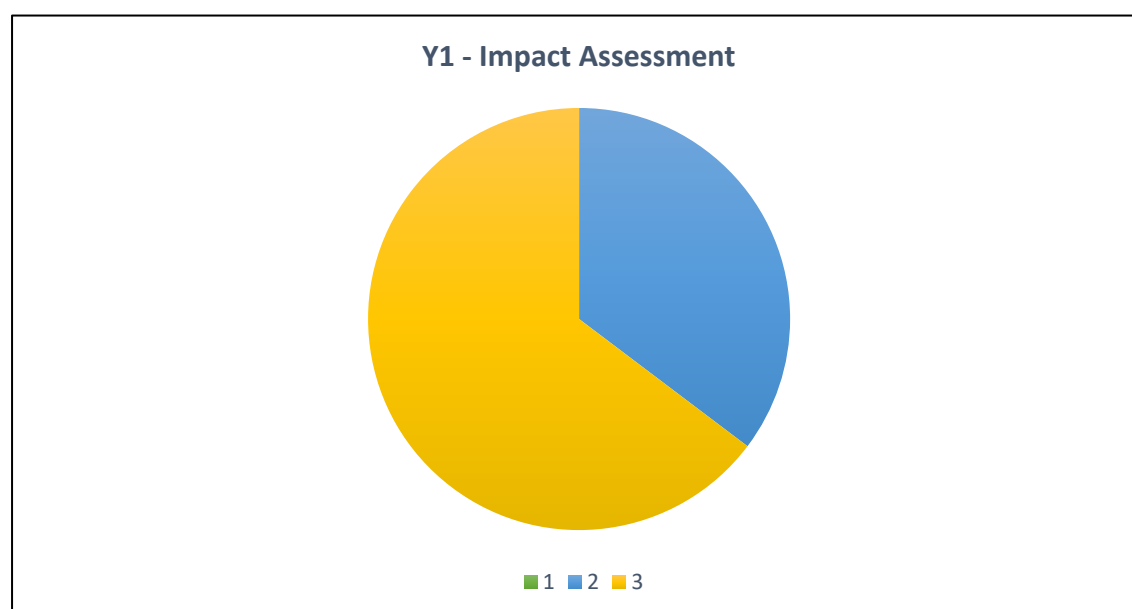


In year 2, reports submitted (n. 19) concerning quality of overall evaluation design demonstrated some improvement, with 32% rated as Excellent (A. Blue), 42% were rated as Fair (B. Orange), with 26% rated as weaker (C. Grey).



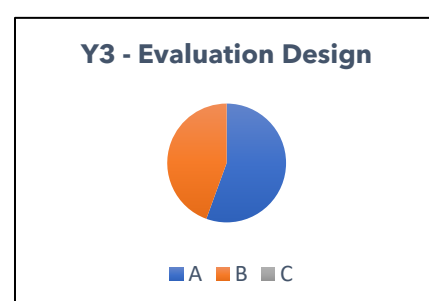
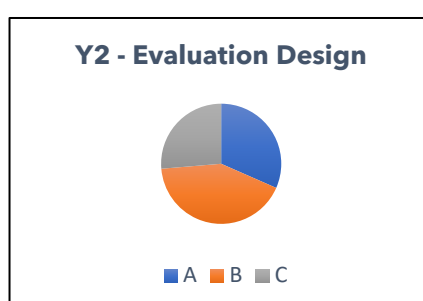
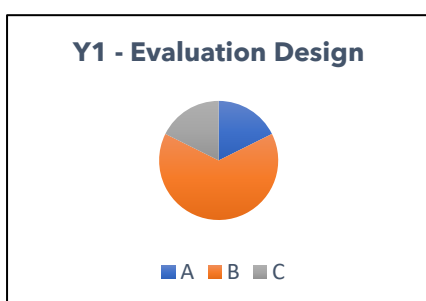
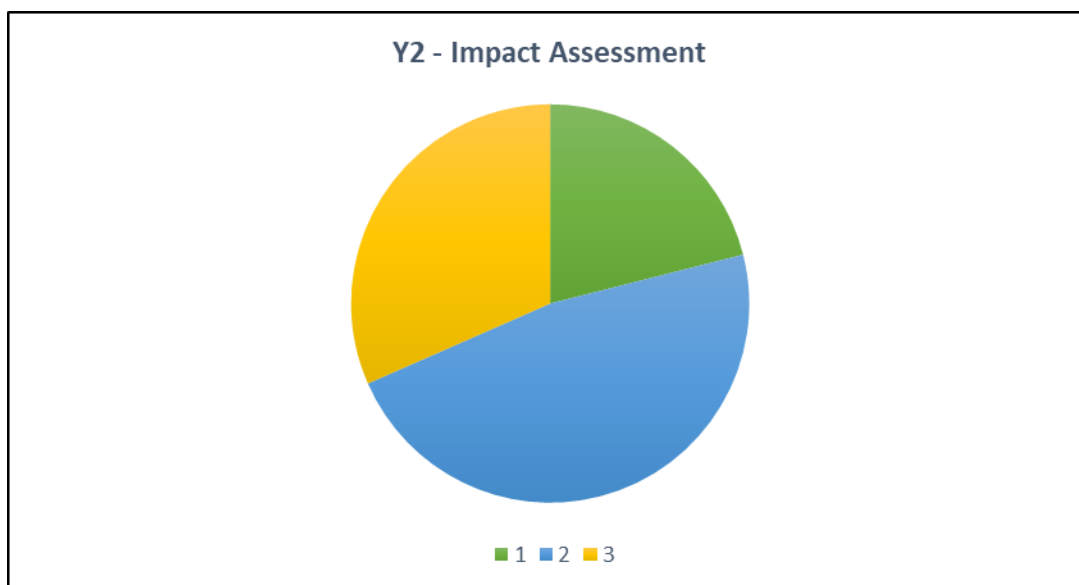
In year 3, reports submitted (n. 18) concerning quality of overall evaluation design demonstrated considerable improvement, with 56% (n. 10) rated as Excellent (A. Blue), 44% (n. 8) were rated as Fair (B. Orange) and there were no reports 0% (n. 0) rated as weaker (C. Grey).

### Impact assessment

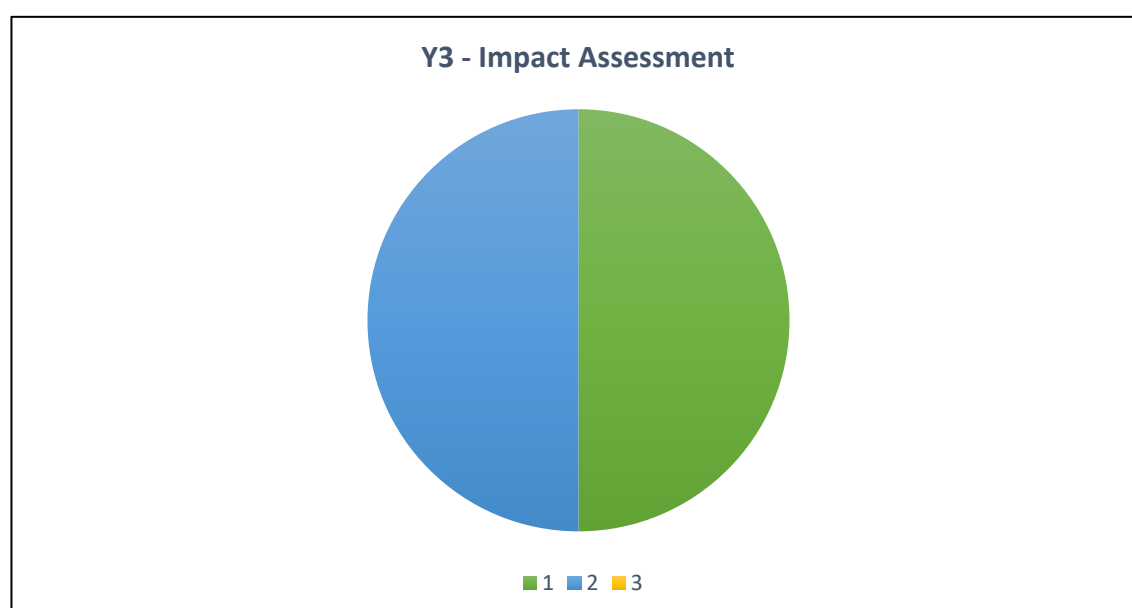


Analysis of Year 1 reports (n. 17) submitted concerning quality of overall impact assessment highlighted that no institutional reports (0%) were scored as Strong (1. Green) in any year 1 submitted reports. 35% were rated as having Some impact (2. Blue) whilst 65% rated as having Minimal impact (scoring a 3, Yellow).





In year 2, institutional reports submitted (n. 19) concerning quality of overall impact assessment demonstrated considerable improvement in impact at the upper end of the range, with 21% scored as Strong (1. Green), 47% were rated as having Some impact (2. Blue) whilst 32% were rated as having Minimal impact (scoring a 3, Yellow).



In year 3, institutional reports submitted (n. 18) concerning quality of overall impact assessment demonstrated considerable improvement in impact across the range, with 50%

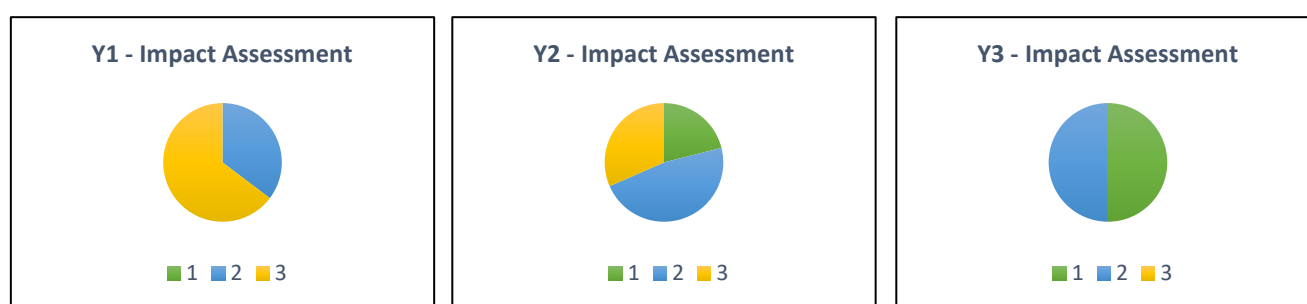
(n. 9) scoring as Strong (1. Green) whilst a further 50% (n. 9) were rated as having Some impact (2. Blue) and no reports submitted 0% (n. 0) were rated as having Minimal impact, or scoring a 3, Yellow.

### Comparisons: Overall evaluation design

Differences of quality between the years 1, 2 and 3 evaluation designs show **a sustained move towards institutions moving into the 'Excellent' category (from 18% to 32% to 54%)**. This is explained by many of the reports, assessed as 'Fair' in years 1 and 2 moving upwards into the 'Excellent' category. This is good to see, with many of the evaluation design approaches building upon the continuous development opportunities introduced and maintained across the RLC duration. This has resulted in many more providers using Theory of Change (ToC) approaches and being more outcomes-focused; these are now reported upon explicitly up to intermediate outcomes level.

Interestingly, there has been a **noticeable upwards trajectory when comparing year 1, 2 and 3 reports**. No reports submitted were rated 'Weaker' in their evaluation design approach; hence, **all submitted institutional reports provided 'Excellent' or 'Fair' evaluation design application**, with the majority rated 'Excellent'.

### Comparisons: Overall impact assessment



Differences between the years 1, 2 and 3 impact assessments demonstrate that **the 'Strong' category rating showed upwards impact improvement across each reported Year**. Indeed, from a completely absent 'Strong' rating for impact in Y1 (0%), **Year 3 now highlights that 50% of institutional reports scored the highest rating of 'Strong'** with year 2 showing the step change towards this point at 21%.

The comparative analysis of impact scores across years 1, 2 and 3 show the most pleasing improvements in the area of either demonstrating impact or having appropriate impact mechanisms in place by which to gather relevant evidence. **100% of all submitted year 3 reports can now highlight either having 'Some' or 'Strong' impact, which is a marked improvement on only 35% being able to do so (at 'Some' level only) in year 1 reporting.**

Some of this is due to gathering evidence over a longer timeframe which is now showing fruitful impact. This also demonstrates the relationship with effective evaluation design. **As the evaluation design improvements across this Theme demonstrate, it then becomes much easier for those reporting to align impact with outcomes** rather than by using activity density as a spurious proxy for impact and effectiveness. Indeed, many of the reports acknowledged this shift.

- It should be noted that the **two lowest category ratings in both evaluation design ('Weaker') and within impact ('Minimal') are now absent from year 3 reporting, indicating significant improvement.**

## Overall RLC thematic analysis

Each institution and cluster that submitted has received a summary of key points from the Evaluation Team concerning where attention might be focused to yield most effectiveness for future-facing sustainability. It should be noted, when interpreting the above year-on-year comparisons, that institutional submissions fluctuated slightly across the RLC Theme; that is, year 1 (n.17 from a possible 19) in year 2 (n. 19 from a possible 19) and in year 3 (n. 18 from a possible 19). Moreover, the number of cluster submissions were more variable, with three submitted from a possible six in the final year of analysis.

From all materials received to date, these points have now been meta-analysed, and the Evaluation Team has drawn upon those occurring most frequently to shape longer-term sustainability.

1. **Assessing ‘critical mass’ when planning enhancement work.** This requires insight regarding whether specific ‘Themes-type’ work can be aligned, or at least considered holistically, with wider strategic change (or refresh) at institutional or sector level, to ensure that a) effectively ‘proportionate’ resources will be allocated accordingly, b) senior leaders with wide spheres of influence will engage and thought-lead the importance of the rationale for change and accompanying interventions, and c) such critical mass can drive better engagement and impact, alongside resourcing.
2. **Using ToC approaches for sustainable effectiveness and impact.** Throughout the submitted evidence, more effectiveness was demonstrated when enhancement work had been planned, implemented and monitored using ToC-type processes, which engaged heterogeneous stakeholder decision-making. Using ToC also refocused approaches to consider outcomes achievement primarily, rather than activity-density.
3. **Reporting and sharing of impact not output.** A common theme in the analysed work concerns the need to reframe outputs dissemination into one which considers impact of enhancement work. This relates to many missed opportunities to longitudinally track impact of a plethora of outputs or produced resources, beyond analysis of content or superficial reach. Considering the purposive nature of produced work in relation to student outcomes, especially longitudinal, and then applying impact pathway approaches would be more beneficial.

Final report prepared by Liz Austen and Stella Jones-Devitt, October 2023.

## Appendix 8: List of figures and tables

### Figures

Fig 1: Evidence exemplar with outcomes mapping

Fig 2: RLC evidence exemplar

Fig 3: Proposed contribution story

Fig 4: Revised contribution story

Fig 5: Timeline of key aims, impacts, effectiveness and innovations

### Tables

Table 1: Designated short-term outcomes concerning awareness and understanding

Table 2: Designated medium-term outcomes concerning behaviour changes

Table 3: Designated long-term outcomes concerning realising aims

Table 4: Analysis of evaluation realisation

Published by QAA, and produced by the sector and QAA Scotland, this report/resource has been commissioned by the Scottish Funding Council to support its duty to secure provision for assessing and enhancing the quality of fundable further and higher education provision.



Published – May2024

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

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