Developing and Supporting the Curriculum:
A synthesis of the second year of the Enhancement Theme 2012-13

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1   Introduction

This report aims to produce a synthesis of the institutional activity across the sector reported in the second year of the current Enhancement Theme, Developing and Supporting the Curriculum. As with the equivalent report covering the first year of the Theme[1], it is based on submitted plans and updates from all of Scotland's higher education institutions[2], on discussions with all steering group members and in most cases with members of their institutional teams. The report should not be read as an overview of all the enhancement work current in the sector, rather it is a synthesis of the activity reported under the Theme itself, and of those issues that steering group members have highlighted as of interest for the near future. At the end of the first year the steering committee agreed to conduct three sector-wide projects in year two: Curriculum for Excellence and its impact on higher education; the flexible curriculum; and staff: enhancing teaching. These projects will be described in separate reports.

The second year of this Theme has proceeded in a wider context of deepening uncertainty for UK higher education (HE), though the Quality Enhancement Framework of the Scottish sector has represented an area of comparative stability. The Universities Quality Working Group's (UQWG) new guidance on quality recommended a continuation of the current arrangements[3], with some updating which included an encouragement for institutions to ensure that engagement with the Themes was considered in institution-led review. This sense of continuity can be felt in the Theme itself. As this second year has progressed, so it has become possible to see more clearly that this Theme is in large part a continuing development of the previous three-year Theme, Graduates for the 21st Century, which itself was an attempt to integrate all the previous Themes from the start of this enhancement-led approach to quality in 2003. It is possible now to step back from the detail of the current work and see the gradual embedding of an enhancement culture, with its focus on the process variables[4], establishing a new discourse around the changing nature of the student experience. The current Enhancement Theme has done much to 'nudge' institutions into generally raising the profile of innovative development both of the curriculum and of the methods through which it is supported. In discussing this, the members of the Steering Committee have expressed

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[1] www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/pages/docdetail/docs/publications/a-synthesis-of-the-first-year-of-the-enhancement-theme-2011-12-and-some-options-for-2012-14.

[2] These are available at www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/enhancement-themes/developing-and-supporting-the-curriculum/resources under 'Reports'.

[3] Scottish Funding Council Circular SFC/14/2012: www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/Circulars_SFC142012/SFC142012.pdf.

[4] The distinction between presage, process and product variables was first described by Biggs (1993), *From theory to practice: a cognitive systems approach*, Higher Education Research & Development, 12,1,73-85. Presage variables define the context before students start learning, process variables describe what goes on as students learn, and product variables relate to the outcomes of that learning.

the view that the cumulative effect of the Themes has a meaningful and positive impact on institutional strategies. Nevertheless, there was a range of views expressed about how evidence for this positive impact on institutions could be obtained and presented to policy makers. This issue is examined in section 5 of the current report.

Embedding graduate attributes

Across the sector, institutions are continuing to seek novel ways of further embedding graduate attributes. At the University of Aberdeen, for example, exercises are being undertaken with employers, academic staff and students, to deepen the discourse around graduate attributes and to better understand effects that can be attributed to the new curriculum. The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland is also monitoring carefully the pattern of changes associated with its own new curriculum.

It is quite striking that most institutions are either currently consulting on a new learning and teaching strategy, or have quite recently produced one. There is little sign that the tendency noted by Gibbs (2012) for the UK sector as a whole is emerging in the Scottish sector - that learning and teaching strategies increasingly constitute a list of tactics or stand-alone projects, targeted on specific short-term problems. On the contrary, the recent institutional strategies in Scotland tend towards statements of high-level enhancement principles for learning and teaching, with in many cases the detailed implementations delegated to school level.

Enhancement tactics

A number of institutions are allocating their Enhancement Theme funding to a bottom-up process of inviting bids for pilot projects aimed at specific issues, with the current Theme providing the framing guidance, and successful pilots adopted for further development. Institutions adopting such an approach include Heriot-Watt University, the University of the West of Scotland and the University of St Andrews. In some cases the projects will be showcased at a learning and teaching event open to all staff.

This report is structured in a straightforward way to summarise the work currently being undertaken under the headings of 'Developing the Curriculum', and 'Supporting the Curriculum', and then to describe some of the ideas and issues emerging from this work that are likely to move up the list of institutional priorities as the pressures for change intensify, and as the embedding of an ambitious enhancement culture continues to deepen.

2   Developing the Curriculum

We can identify essentially two broad approaches to the development across the sector of the HE curriculum. Both derive from the acknowledgement that the curriculum, and its supporting processes, must adapt significantly to more fully equip our graduates for employment in the modern world, and provide the values and capabilities that will underpin their lifetime contribution to society. Both are therefore implementations of the need to more explicitly address within the curriculum itself graduate attributes and the outcomes of Graduates for the 21st Century.

The first approach is to target graduate attributes directly within each programme, partly by offering modules within the subject that are designed specifically with graduate attributes in mind, and partly by introducing a broader range of learning tasks and types of assessment, designed to ensure that students can demonstrate how to share and apply their acquired knowledge, communicate it to others, and continue to develop it in ways consistent with the needs of the employability and citizenship agendas.

Design Methods

Methods for achieving enhancement through course design are continuing to evolve. Robert Gordon University, for example, is developing the 'course design intensive' approach across a range of disciplines, including the need to train University staff as facilitators in the process. At Queen Margaret University a tool is being developed that will guide programme teams through the entire curriculum development process.

The second approach is to offer students more flexible pathways for broader outcomes, allowing students to progress to graduation with combinations of modules that are wider than conventional programmes, encouraging interdisciplinary learning and allowing students studying a science, technology, engineering and maths programme, say, to study a second language, or for humanities students to include science or maths modules. Such personalised pathways can extend to co-curriculum activities, and more extensive use of recognition of prior learning. However, Gibbs (2012)[5] has reported that a tendency in the opposite direction - a reduction in curriculum diversity - seems to be occurring across UK higher education institutions (HEIs) in general, as an unintended consequence of National Student Survey (NSS) and Key Information Set data[6] which compare only conventional subject labels. So far, the evidence from our discussions within the Theme has not revealed that this side effect is occurring in Scotland.

Programme focus

An example of the increasing focus on programmes, rather than on modules, is provided by Edinburgh Napier University. A symposium on programme leadership has been followed by a systematic attempt to understand the student experience of whole programmes. The 20-credit staff guidance handbook is being rewritten to change the entire emphasis from modules to programmes. A second example is provided by the Curriculum Mapping and Assessment Blueprinting (CMAB) project at the University of Glasgow. This involves mapping intended learning outcomes across an entire programme onto assessment methods. The approach has been completed for Dentistry and is now being trialled across a range of programmes in other schools.

A third approach, which we discuss below in 4.2 as one that is emerging, can be thought of as 'extending' or 'connecting' the HE curriculum.

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[5] Gibbs (2012) *Implications of 'Dimensions of Quality' in a Market Environment*, Higher Education Academy, York.

[6] Some would add Higher Education Statistics Agency statistics to the National Student Survey and the Key Information Sets that provide public data influencing institutional priorities.

3 Supporting the Curriculum

The concept of flexibility also frames many of the ways in which institutions are enhancing curriculum support. The ways in which course information and learning materials are being accessed by campus-based students, not just by distance learners, is increasingly exploiting the now near-ubiquitous ownership of mobile devices. Almost all delivery across the sector now employs an advanced virtual learning environment, and in some cases we see the early development of personal learning environments that allow the individual student to integrate information related to study with that used in social and other aspects of their lives.

Peer support: approaches developed jointly with Student Associations

Several institutions are working with their Student Association to both design and run peer support systems. The overall aim of these schemes is to ensure that all undergraduate students on campus will have access to various forms of peer support such as peer assisted learning schemes, academic families, mentoring, buddy and house schemes.

Several institutions are attempting to enhance the level of personal guidance given to students. There is an increasing awareness that poor student ratings of feedback are not always aligned with coursework, but are often related to something less tangible: their perception of how much attention the institution is paying to them as individuals. Many institutions are extending their peer support mechanisms as a response to this issue.

Flexibility also extends to student mobility. Acknowledging the potent effect of student mobility schemes for the individual achievement of graduate attributes is a focus of a number of current policy initiatives at the institutional level.

Student placements

Three examples illustrate the kind of opportunities being developed for student placements. All second and third year 'professionally aligned' students in Glasgow Caledonian University's School of Health and Life Sciences are offered the possibility of a placement in the Grameen Caledonian College, or in related community projects in Bangladesh. Within Scotland, Edinburgh Napier University, working with ScotlandIS and e-skills UK, has created a placement 'brand' to which employers are returning each year and which can be accessed by all of Scotland's HEIs. In Nursing at the University of the West of Scotland an evaluation is being conducted with nine exchange partners to understand what makes student exchange systems work well for all parties.

We see also the continuing development of pedagogy. One strand of this involves the introduction of project work that either involves more real-world settings, or involves teams of students working together from different years or different disciplines. There is a growing use of social constructivist methods, moving towards more group work, more enquiry-based methods, and more student-led activity in general. There are examples in almost every institution now of the 'flipped classroom'. Feedback to students continues to occupy a central place in enhancement thinking across the sector, with a number of examples[7] of engaging students in active use of the feedback in some way - an approach that has emerged in earlier Themes.

Active use of feedback

An example from the Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh is typical of many attempts underway to enhance the way feedback is given, understood and then acted on by a student. In this example both staff and students have access to a shared digital space, the student as well as the tutor assesses the work submitted, and the mutual understanding of how this should be formative is agreed and recorded. Students are thus given a central role in formulating their own feedback.

The need to enhance the professional development of staff is acknowledged by almost all institutions, and is represented in the current Theme as a strand of work given the status of a cross-Theme project: staff: enhancing teaching. The outcomes of this work will be described in detail in a separate report.

Part-time teaching staff

Within the context of the development of more formalised approaches to continuing professional development in general, several Scottish HEIs are exploring ways of meeting the professional needs of part-time teaching staff. This is particularly an issue for the specialist institutions, such as the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. The Open University in Scotland is exploring a number of online approaches to this problem, including the use of social media.

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[7] The example chosen here is described by Pirie, I, Cordiner, S, & Triggs, J (2011) *Digital Spaces for Learning and Assessment in Art and Design*. Downloadable from www.eca.ac.uk/21cg/.

4. Emergent Issues

4.1. Student Engagement

In every Scottish institution there is a focus on the issue of student engagement. This can be approached from a number of different perspectives. At one level, most HEIs are taking active measures to improve the way the student voice is heard by the institution, through encouraging student representatives at all levels to participate in committee work involving the development of policy over a wide range of issues, including curriculum development. In addition, many institutions are developing their own survey methods, supplementing data from the NSS. Then, institutions are attempting to find more explicit and transparent ways of responding to the student voice, once heard. Various aspects of curriculum support, such as the accessibility of services or the design of extended induction, are becoming more responsive to student feedback, and the need for inclusivity.

> **Understanding student differences**
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> Most institutions are making efforts to understand student engagement from a widening access perspective. The University of Abertay, Dundee, for example, is exploring the resilience (and 'academic buoyancy') of students from complex backgrounds to adapt to university study, and the relation of this to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation.

Some institutions are going further in their efforts to put some real force behind the idea of students as partners, rather than consumers, by developing opportunities for students to act as change agents. There are several current examples of students accepting responsibility for researching and designing enhancements across a range of issues.

> **Examples of students as change agents**
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> At the University of Edinburgh undergraduates have designed software to describe elective courses entirely from a student perspective so that students considering choosing a particular module can access 'reviews' from previous students. Undergraduates at the University of Strathclyde have been employed as summer interns to research how students would most effectively engage with personal development planning and to design a personal development planning system that is now being trialled across schools. At Glasgow School of Art students have initiated a project to examine critically the existing methods of student engagement, while at the University of Stirling student 'officer' posts within schools have been created to work directly on enhancements. The Student Association at the University of the West of Scotland is leading on work aimed at the deeper understanding of data on attainment and progression.

Student engagement can also be addressed at an individual level through pedagogy. Almost all previous Themes have touched on the relationship between the institution, through its teaching and assessment methods, and the individual student's sense of commitment to engage fully in transformational learning. Many institutional learning and teaching strategies are newly committed to the development of peer supported learning methods and many of the institutional team members have indicated that student engagement with learning, in its varied forms, represents a suitable topic for a future Theme. Through this many of the previous Themes would be revisited.

Gibbs (2012) has argued that progress has been made in the United States of America on collecting evidence about what processes lead to what enhancements 'partly because a large number of institutions have been prepared to adopt the same evidence-based conceptual framework and use the same valid evaluation tools'. There is some support in the current Theme for the idea that the Scottish sector would benefit from an attempt to devise its own measures of student engagement. In that connection it is worth noting that, although the guidance to institutions about participation in the NSS has moved to a clear expectation that all will participate, the NSS itself is scheduled for a review in 2014 and the Universities Quality Working Group has been invited to consider the development of a Scottish Information Set.

4.2.   Connecting the Higher Education Curriculum

There is a growing awareness that the HE curriculum cannot be regarded solely as bounded by its current courses. Rather, curriculum design must build on a student's previous educational experience, and must feed forward to offer graduates lifelong development. Most HEIs are pursuing links with secondary education, as well as actively developing existing and new arrangements with Scotland's colleges. The most obvious current focus is on Curriculum for Excellence. HEIs are not only considering the articulation and admissions issues the Curriculum for Excellence raise but are also starting to address the challenges for curriculum development by those school leavers who will soon have experienced learning differently from previous cohorts when they enter HE. More than this, however, under a widening access agenda many universities are developing a profile in primary education, while with outcome agreements emphasising regionalisation there is increasing provision direct into senior level in secondary schools. The idea of a seamless lifelong learning journey is starting to emerge as something more than an abstract concept in a qualifications framework, with the HE curriculum being extended both backwards and forwards in time from the direct HE learning experience.

The joined-up curriculum

Both Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) and the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) represent examples of institutions for which connecting their HE provision with that at different Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework levels is a strategic priority. SRUC is working to integrate the curriculum from the Scottish Agricultural College with that of the land-based colleges with which it has recently merged, while UHI is pursuing the goal of a fully joined-up regional provision across school, college and university.

4.3. Discipline Focus

A frequently expressed view about the Theme is that curriculum development and support is interpreted significantly differently across different disciplines. An organisational trend across the sector has been to cluster related disciplines into larger units, so that schools or faculties are both fewer and more influential in setting enhancement policies of their own. It is argued by some that we should acknowledge these differences more explicitly within the Theme, which may currently be too aligned with centrally-driven, generic, institutional approaches. It is argued that these discipline clusters are effectively developing their own networks, and the Theme could encourage and support these to focus on learning and teaching enhancements.

> **Discipline driven development**
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> In several institutions ideas about curriculum development are starting in one discipline and then being taken up by others. At the University of Dundee, for example, work around the flexible curriculum has been extended from Engineering into Life Sciences. At Glasgow Caledonian University a curriculum 'refresh' in each school is shaping the development of a new learning and teaching strategy for the institution.

4.4. Online learning

Across the sector much enhancement activity involves the development of online learning, both as a vehicle for distance learning, particularly at Master's level, but increasingly as a mainstream enabler in the learning experience of all students, even those enjoying a high proportion of face-to-face contact with teaching staff. The accelerating rise in the take-up of open educational resources is forcing a rethink about teaching roles, and about the professional development of staff. Similarly, the issue of the digital literacy of students impacts on the student engagement agenda, as well as addressing some aspects of inclusivity and widening access. While the technical aspects of online learning have long been the preserve of JISC, and while learning technology has been intrinsic to several of the earlier Themes, as well as to the Scottish Funding Council-funded e-learning transformation programme, there is a view that the Enhancement Themes should play an even more important role in the sector-wide sharing and debating of the pedagogical and support approaches to this significant change in educational method.

4.5. Leadership in Teaching

A view expressed in a number of the discussions on which this report is based is that, while most institutions are acknowledging the importance of teaching leadership in their promotion policies, it would be helpful if this aspect of academic work could be more explicitly encouraged and supported. There are both organisational and individual aspects to this. Some institutions are beginning to look at how programme leaders are prepared, trained and supported. Teaching awards of various kinds are now common, but these are usually awarded to individuals rather than to programme teams. As we have noted, a new focus on programmes, rather than modules, can be detected across the sector and this should lead to the recognition of programme leadership[8] as a crucial element in a team-based enhancement culture.

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[8] Some examples (from Europe rather than from the UK) of institutional approaches to encouraging programme leadership are given in Gibbs (2012)..

> **Staff mentoring**
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> The University of Abertay, Dundee, is starting the development of a cross-institution peer mentoring scheme that would contribute to the professional development of all teaching staff, but would exist quite independently of formal management structures.

5.   Impact of the Theme

Discussions with the steering group members and institutional teams also considered the topic of impact. There were quite wide-ranging views on this. The main issues raised were as follows:

- In general it was agreed that assessing the overall impact of a Theme is a different challenge from that of judging the success of particular activities or interventions, although in one sense it is the cumulation of outcomes from the latter that provides the overall effect. It is, however, widely argued that impact can rarely be measured within the timeframe of a single Theme and that claims and recommendations from previous Themes should be re-assessed more explicitly and rigorously than at present.

- Although it was generally acknowledged that individual institutions might give higher priority to the formal evaluation of particular innovations, it was felt that many institutions were not well equipped to do this. Innovations should in general not be introduced before data has been collected on the current position, but this may be seen simply as an additional burden. Some argued that the Themes should be more focused on the methodological issues concerning the gathering of evidence about specific changes, and that this was an area where Enhancement-led Institutional Review and the Enhancement Themes could work more effectively in tandem. The point made in section 4.1 about the need for sector-wide measures is very relevant to this debate. There is general unease about placing too much weight on measures of student satisfaction.

- The 2008 external evaluation of the impact of the Enhancement Themes[9] discussed the challenge of disentangling 'the specific effects of the Themes from those of other drivers for change within institutions'. The report stated: 'many informants could "feel" the impact but would find it extremely difficult to pinpoint specific links to the Themes. A number of references were made to the fact that where Theme-related activities were already taking place implicitly, the Themes have served to make these more explicit'. Steering Committee members re-emphasised this point but acknowledged that institutions could perhaps more explicitly exploit the indicators of enhancement adopted by the QAA.

- There is an emerging debate around the assertion that UK institutions[10], and universities globally[11], are being driven more by publically available data, and by league tables, than by quality enhancement activities. This argument should be debated in a Scottish context.

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[9] *Evaluation of the Impact of the Quality Enhancement Themes.* Centre for the Study of Education and Training, Lancaster, 2008.

[10] See Gibbs (2012).

[11] Rauhvargers, A (2013) *Global University Rankings and their Impact:* Report 2, European University Association, Brussels.

6.   Continuing evolution of the Themes

Finally, two issues about the Enhancement Themes in general were raised frequently in the discussions for this report.

• The Themes encourage a focus on particular issues: previous Themes need longitudinal follow-up so that enhancement proceeds across a broad front.

• Within a Theme, collaboration across institutions should be incentivised. The Themes can do much to shift the balance between competition and collaboration across the sector in favour of collaboration and towards the development of approaches that individual institutions would find it difficult to achieve by themselves.

These points should be considered in the context of a unanimous view that this Enhancement Theme is continuing to enjoy a rising level of commitment from, and a positive impact on, the whole Scottish HE sector.

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