



## **Evidence for Enhancement:** Improving the Student Experience

# **Creative Disciplines' Annual Programme Monitoring Briefing:**

**Considering outcomes metrics as part of enhancing  
programme design and delivery**

**June 2019**

**Representing the Creative Disciplines' Collaborative Cluster:**

Vicky Gunn, Glasgow School of Art (GSA)

**Contact:** [v.gunn@gsa.ac.uk](mailto:v.gunn@gsa.ac.uk)

## Metrics and annual monitoring

Metrics are increasingly being used for regulatory purposes (judgements by funders and governments regarding the quality of education as provided in the creative disciplines). These are most easily divided into three categories:

1 **Incoming data:** Information sets telling programme leaders something about who is coming into the programme of study and where they have come from. For example, this can include: average academic tariffs on entry; socio-cultural composition of a given cohort; socio-economic mix of a given cohort; averages of distance from home to institution of incoming students. Shifts in any one of these might mean that it is time to consider enhancements to induction and transitions in and through processes.

### Example:

A performance programme leader receives, year-on-year, data that shows an increase in academic tariff on entry, greater student distance to enter the programme, and a widening diversity of students in each cohort. Each one of these presents a question around enhancement. If the students are more academically oriented, how will they manage the practical; if they are more practical how will they manage the academic? If the students are more diverse, can the same assumptions about relevant content be made? If the students are travelling from further afield, does this affect how they will study? This data can help the programme leader understand changing trends in their student body and consider enhancement to transitions in support.

2 **Through-going data:** Information sets that tell programme leaders something about what is happening on, and has happened on, their programmes. This can include continuation and progression metrics. These can be cross-referenced with socio-cultural and socio-economic metrics as well as grade distributions to identify potential patterns to be critiqued.

### Example:

A design programme leader receives a data set that shows there has been a decline in continuation from year one to year two of their programme, two years in a row, and that this is cross-referenced with other metrics that suggest an engagement gap by a cluster of students. Nothing has been raised at the staff-student consultation committee to suggest there is a problem. This is a highly complex pattern recognition situation for this programme leader. The questions that need to be addressed for enhancement purposes are mainly about why parts of a cohort are not engaged in a way that encourages them to stay on programme. This is made more complex when the programme leader sees that the grade distribution suggests non-engagement is happening regardless of grades awarded. This data might be suggesting that the programme leader would benefit from closer partnership working with the students, as well as collaborating with student services and academic development to identify potential enhancements.

3 **Outcome data:** Information that tells programme leaders something about what happens to their students after graduation.

**Example:**

A fine art programme, noted for the success of its graduates in arts prizes and awards postgraduation, receives graduate outcomes data that suggests the majority of students are struggling to make a taxable income and are working in industries which don't require their graduate qualifications after three years. This data, when cross-referenced, shows even lower outcomes in a particular socio-economic group and in students with a declared disability. On top of this, it is clear that there are grade distributions within a given ethnic minority group which demonstrate a gap between their awards and non-ethnic minority student awards (referred to as an attainment gap).

This is a trick example, in as much as it represents both actual situations the sector faces currently (being exposed in England through the development of teaching excellence framework metrics) and the creative disciplines' own worst fears about the implications of this when it comes to funding conversations. Nonetheless, it demonstrates starkly the need for programme leaders to come to terms with the range of metrics-based outcomes that might accompany their students after they have left the programme. These outcomes include: widening access to the creative arts; supporting students to build both social and work-based capital whilst on a programme; and dealing with the no longer avoidable ethnic minority and disability-based attainment gaps. It also encourages programme leaders to consider the values their programmes work with, and how these values are themselves outcomes that mitigate the metrics.

Commonly-used data sets which are disaggregated to the subject level currently include:

- equalities (equality and diversity data as well as socio-economic data such as SIMD/POLAR) - student demography (incoming data)
- continuation, progression, retention (through-going data)
- institutional student experience surveys (through-going data)
- National Student Survey (through-going data that hints at an outcome in terms of sentiment for a student's overall educational experience)
- grade distribution, especially where grade inflation is implied (outcome data)
- Graduate Outcomes (outcome data)
- Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (outcome data).

Further information on metrics used for annual monitoring is available at:

[www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/en/current-enhancement-theme/defining-and-capturing-evidence/data-landscape-resource](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/en/current-enhancement-theme/defining-and-capturing-evidence/data-landscape-resource)

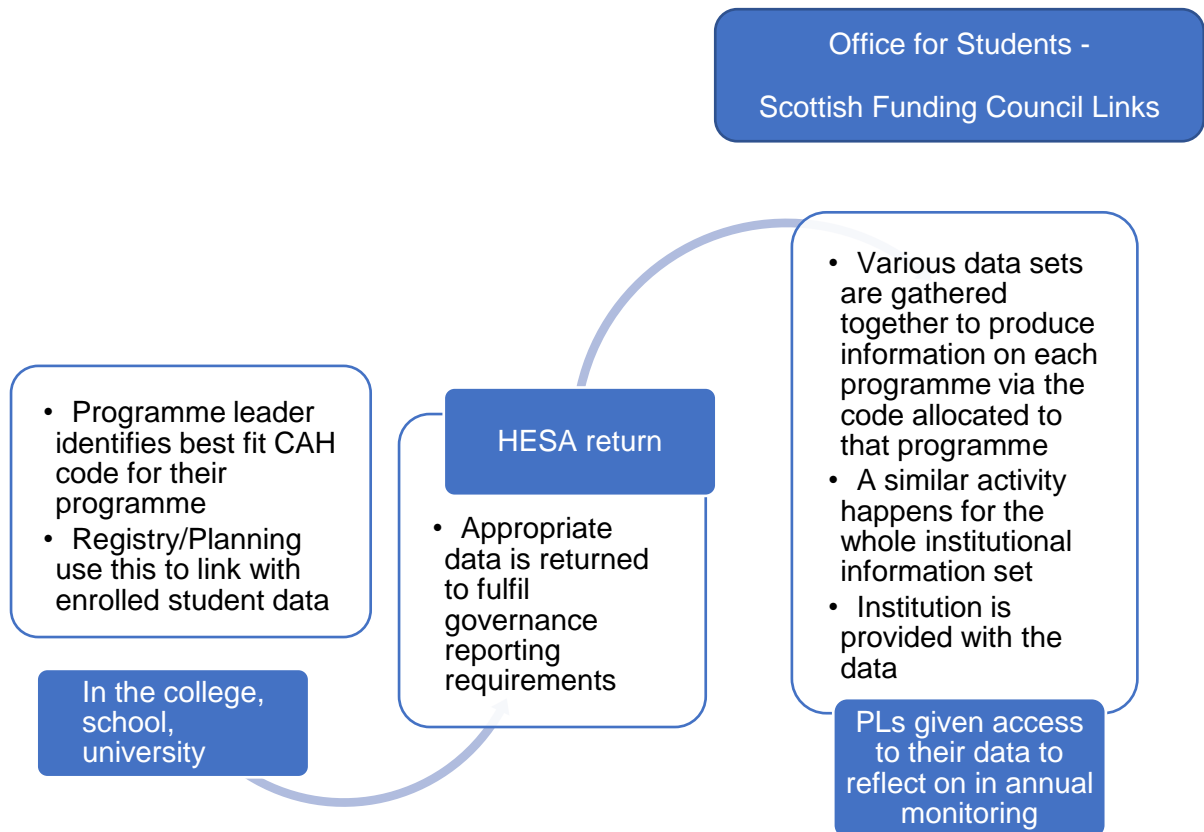
This growth in metrics use means that subject and programme leaders need to:

- Develop greater confidence in engagement with metrics and experimental data regarding student sentiment and perception, engagement and outcomes as evidence of impact.
- Recognise when the numbers indicate an actual trend and when they are just within a normal margin of error (and therefore do not suggest clear differences that can be acted on). Enacting enhancements that respond, in effect, to just one or two students on a small cohort are unlikely to achieve the improved outcomes hoped for, but rather lead to a cycle of 'taking something out' only to discover that the next cohort really wanted that 'something' in.
- Develop, define and engage with indicators of impact (to do this effectively may well mean working collaboratively with a range of players in the cultural and creative ecology, as well as the students).
- Work with reflective analysis rubrics that underpin annual programme discussions, identifying and mapping the creative 'legacy' of the educational provision.
- Begin to consider how they can benchmark what is going on in their programme, with what is going on in the institution more generally, as well as benchmark their programme against other similar programmes. It is worth remembering that benchmarking by subject code is likely to become more important as the systems for collecting the data evolve.

## **Pragmatics: Considering the 'so what' of programmes and the skills agenda**

Movement in higher education regulation tends to mean that what higher educators do is increasingly publicly emphasised in terms of certain forms of impact. These forms of impact are associated with the metrics being used. Thus, student satisfaction (sentiment and perception) and student continued engagement in their studies (continuation, retention and progression) are mapped alongside postgraduation student employment and income and further/higher study outcomes. As well as this mapping, these categories are then cross-referenced with the demographic information relating to equalities and socio-economic categories. With such metrics now being made available to funders and governments at the level of subject (through subject identifiers called CAH codes), how programme leaders think about the impact of their programmes is likely to change. Until recently, the external focus has been more on the institutional level data. Now the Office for Students can bring a range of data sets together to feed back to institutions at subject level. This includes HESA returns, the results of the National Students' Survey, Graduate Outcomes and Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) (Figure 1 illustrates the process).

**Figure 1: Process of disaggregating data sets by subject code**



## The questions that access to such data asks of programme leaders:

### How does a subject/programme leader reflect on the relationship between their programme and their programme's outcomes?

From the perspective of critical reflection, programme leaders may find that they are asked explicitly to analyse the links between what is done in the curriculum and what happens to their students subsequently. Such an analysis is fraught with methodological problems. Cause and effect in the links between creative practices' education and subsequent activity is notoriously difficult to prove convincingly, especially given the non-linear learning journey many creative practitioners pursue. Nonetheless, this type of reflection is increasingly being demanded and it requires engagement with information about the student demography, continuation and progression, related grade distribution, and where students subsequently go after graduation. Key to this is:

- Having a basic understanding of when a data set is representing a statistically relevant piece of information (that is, something that requires a response) and when the variations in the data set are actually within what is known as 'the margin of error'. This is very difficult when a programme has small numbers (below 20). Creative disciplines thus need to constantly triangulate what they are given in the data and other forms of information that demonstrate who the students are, how they have responded to their experience, and how this matches up with what a programme aims to provide.

Commonly these tend to be internal surveys, student-staff consultations, other forms of evaluation.

- Being able to address the question of how and what is provided within and alongside a given programme to enable students to develop their own impact (through learning and through engagement with various different players within a cultural and creative ecology while they are on the programme). If the learning journey is actually not linear, this reflection has to be able to consider the serendipitous and uncertainty-based aspects of what happens while a creative student is learning (Figure 2 is a visual reminder of the non-linear nature of the student learning journey).

### What is the relationship between how a subject/programme leader designs and leads the delivery of a programme and what happens subsequently to the students that took it?

In short, outcomes metrics especially require a response in this context. If the outcomes metrics demonstrate a recurring pattern of low income initially for creative arts graduates (which in their simple current form, they do), this is significant. As a consequence, increasingly, a programme leader's response is likely to be focused on how a programme supports given specific professional AND general socio-economic skills agendas, cross-referenced with 'social mobility' metrics (that is, equalities and widening participation).

This is not so different in spirit to what creative disciplines have been asked to do with respect to equalities, widening access, employability and enterprise objectives for the last two decades. The difference now is the seductive weight of the metrics in terms of messages about postgraduation employment, skills and income, including the explicit role of attainment gaps related to certain equalities groups which are maintaining inequality.

#### Figure 2: The deviant gyrations of the creative student's learner journey

(produced by Claire Stringer at 'Focus On Graduate Skills: Sharing Practice', June 2019 © morethanminutes.co.uk)



## What does a subject/programme leader need to consider when 'so what' is the question?

In these cases, the 'what' of creative disciplines' higher education provision is being superseded by the 'so what?' economically and 'so what?' socio-economically. In effect, narratives regarding the student experience no longer finish with, '*and they (our students) lived happily ever after*'. Instead, programme leaders need to demonstrate an awareness of what happened to students once they had finished their degrees (at least from the perspective of employment and income). There are at least three ways of addressing this question during annual monitoring:

- Understanding what **incoming** measures express about the student body, and then converting this information into what it might mean in terms of enhancing the curriculum. Linking this enhancement not just to what a student does in each year, but how it helps develop the professional skills required once the student leaves the programme (recognising that some of these skills are not necessarily discipline-specific). In the creative disciplines, this clearly goes beyond monetisation/economics to social, cultural, health and wellbeing, as well as forms of innovation not easily articulated in current systems of regulation.
- Understanding how to respond to **outcome** measures (such as LEO) by beginning to address the broader **value** of the disciplines and the education they provide, while, at the same time, building curricular opportunities that reach a significant proportion of any given student cohort in a manner that builds impact.
- Understanding how to be critically creative in the face of both by demonstrating the unexpected, deviant, disruptive outcomes that are uncatchable by metrics.

As a collaborative cluster, we suggest that following engagement with the outputs of this cluster and the linked reflective toolkit, simple annual monitoring for this agenda could be done in conjunction with the following template:

**Figure 3: Considering impact (the 'so what') as a significant part of annual monitoring in the light of current outcomes metrics**

<p><b>1 Narrative</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Succinctly outline what the provision is within the subject each year.</li> <li>• What might the metrics imply about what is being done in the programme's curriculum?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What professional development is provided within the programme, alongside the programme and serendipitously?</li> <li>• How is the balance between discipline-specific professional development and broader skills, attributes and metaskills for postgraduation attended to?</li> <li>• What links into communities are there through the projects, briefs and other activities in which students engage?</li> </ul>
<p><b>2 Justification</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why is the provision as it is? (for example: How does it support developing creativity as an expertise, professional development and community engagement?)</li> <li>• What enhancements have been made over the last academic session?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can we ensure that our decision making is metrics-informed, rather than metrics-driven?</li> <li>• How have we balanced encouraging specific professional-disciplinary strengths and general metaskill strengths?</li> </ul>
<p><b>3 Analysis/evaluation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why those enhancements?</li> <li>• How do they improve porosity between the subject and the creative 'field'? How is the 'creative field' engaged with?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What evidence informed the decisions about what to enhance?</li> <li>• What evidence will be gathered to evaluate whether the enhancements are working as hoped?</li> </ul>
<p><b>4 Impact</b></p> <p>Explain the impacts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the enhancements had on student learning in terms of creativity as expertise in the creative field, professional development, community engagement</li> <li>• the associated students have had more broadly because of the way teaching has been enhanced.</li> </ul>	<p>This is where response to the outcomes metrics that are available is essential:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What were the 'results' of what we did in terms of the students and their outcomes?</li> <li>• How many were affected - was it a small number but a high impact on them; or large numbers?</li> <li>• How do we come to terms with identifying the appropriate scale (numbers of students affected; timescale of implementation) of enhancement to achieve the desired impacts?</li> </ul>
<p><b>5 Identification of future improvements</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify how continued improvement will occur, drawing on broad metrics data, student views and the needs of disciplinary rigour and stretch.</li> </ul>	



## **Aspirations: Creating more meaningful indicators for critical reflection annually**

Creative disciplines within higher education need to shift the focus from the limited range of instruments of measurement that are currently used in annual monitoring to a broader reflection on graduate outcomes and impacts - social, cultural, innovation, economy (business and skills), wellbeing - with skills and enterprise mindsets, for example, being one thread only rather than the entirety of the conversation.

**Subject/programme leaders will need to move from case study-based description and assertion about what they do (achievements) to more creative analysis of metrics and evidence of professional development in programmes (impact - in terms of reach and significance of what is done).** This requires attending to other agendas which play out in how the creative disciplines are engaged with and judged by other audiences (for example, funders, governments and the communities in which the programmes sit).

Possible approaches to this include:

- Where possible, drawing on and adapting other instruments of arts impact that are themselves emerging through creative arts' funding regulation to consider what impact means for the outcomes of creative arts programmes.
- Playing a much more active role in the identification and closing of skills gaps in the range of policy 'areas' into which a given programme's students go.
- Being open to offering innovative approaches to enabling more porosity between the learning and teaching spaces and the creative ecology as well as the knowledge economy, including graduate apprenticeships that benefit the creative sector.
- Recognising impact in the arenas identified within the collaborative cluster's scoping report (year 1): social wellbeing (health policies); arts, society and culture (cultural policy); innovation (analogue and digital creative economies policies); education (across the learner/learning journey policies); and economy, business and skills (economic policies/skills policies).

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2019  
18 Bothwell Street, Glasgow G2 6NU  
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel: 0141 572 3420  
Web: [www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk)