Reflections on Year One
Discussion at Theme Leaders Group
11 October 2018

Introduction

At the meeting of the Theme Leaders Group on 11 October 2018, we ran a workshop activity aimed at capturing the story of the first year of the Theme. Members were encouraged to reflect on the assumptions, ambitions and concerns they had had at the beginning of year one, what had transpired during the year, and how (if at all) their thinking had changed as we entered year two. This discussion was to encompass institutional, collaborative and sector-level perspectives.

We split TLG into five small groups, each facilitated by a member of QAA staff, and used Web Whiteboard (www.webwhiteboard.com) to capture discussion, with all facilitators contributing live. This allowed us to 'crowdsource' the story of the year one. A screenshot of the Web Whiteboard can be found at Appendix 1.

At the beginning of year one: what were our assumptions, ambitions and concerns?

Members reported that institutions had welcomed the Theme, understanding that we need to challenge a basic assumption that we are already using data: while we are good at examining it, we are perhaps less good at learning from it, and we are perhaps less comfortable with qualitative than quantitative evidence.

There was an understanding that competing priorities would hinder the progress of Themes work. Institutions understandably examined how they might use the Theme to progress existing work and align their Theme work to strategic priorities.

Ambitions included the enhancement of sector-level data capability and greater engagement with students about issues surrounding data. A key concern was the use of existing data, and specifically students’ understanding of how data is used: are our processes open, and are our feedback loops closed?

There were some concerns early on about the scope of the Theme. Early perceptions that it might be too narrow (focusing on metrics) were soon replaced by perceptions that it might in fact be too broad and ambitious, and that this might hinder progress. It was also perceived to
be very complex, due to the various elements and strands of activity.

Another early concern was about how to engage people with the Theme. Ambitions about bringing new colleagues, such as Planners, to the Theme were balanced by concerns that it might be challenging to secure commitment from senior management and continuity from students.

Linked to concerns about the breadth of the Theme, there were early concerns that it might be difficult to work out what could work in terms of collaboration. However, it was reported that there was rich discussion within and between HEIs. The launch event created a bit of a collaborative ‘shopping list’, and it was noted that it would be worth comparing this to the collaborative clusters that had been supported in years one and two.

During the year: what did we learn? Did anything take us by surprise?

Members reported that the understanding of institutional data was being refined; that institutions were thinking more about the evidence they used, and reflecting on how to use it to tell a story. The Theme was helping to address weaknesses in institutional practice.

The question of how best to position the Theme in order to avoid misunderstanding among staff and students remained pertinent during the first year. Institutions were mindful of the importance of inspiring students around the Theme, and this continued to challenge, especially for multi-campus institutions. Using the word ‘evidence’ as opposed to (or in addition to) ‘data’ seemed to be key.

Getting the right teams in place to drive the Theme within institutions could be challenging, and the slow pace of institutional change could be frustrating. There were also external challenges during session 2017-18, such as industrial action and the introduction of GDPR, which hindered progress.

The dissemination of learning within institutions was suggested as being a key to success. The D-Cubed dissemination methodology was highlighted as an example.

Members reported that the collaborative clusters had been key to helping institutions make sense of the Theme and get work underway, bringing specific areas of a broad Theme into sharper focus and with clear outputs to work towards. In terms of collaboration in a broader sense, members recognised the value of developing informal connections and networks, but also noted that it could be difficult to know who in their institution could be of most help. ‘Critical friend’ type collaborations were important, but difficult to develop.

At the beginning of year two: how has our thinking changed?

There was a general sense that, at the beginning of the second year of the Theme, confidence was developing at both institutional and sector level. First year reports, second year plans, and the 2018 Conference were all offered as examples of meaningful engagement with the Theme.

There was a sense that student collaboration is moving towards genuine partnership working, that a sense of community is developing among student representatives, and that student representatives are developing the confidence to tackle issues based on evidence. It was noted that continuity of student representation on TLG could be a challenge, and that this might be mediated by relying less on sabbatical officers.
There was growing confidence about the collaborative elements of the Theme, though it was also suggested that thought should be given to how clusters might continue to run beyond the end of the Theme.

The work undertaken by the Planners group was felt to be valuable, and it was hoped that this work would develop in the second and third years of the Theme, though it was also acknowledged that due to existing workloads the leadership and resourcing of this work might be challenging.

The Theme appears to be inspiring conversations within institutions about what constitutes evidence (qualitative as well as quantitative) and how it is used (especially with regard to the ethics of using student data). Some members reported that the first year had reinforced thinking in their institutions, rather than changing it. The Theme appears to support existing institutional priorities, and is providing an opportunity to shine a light on issues that may have been a concern for some time. However, there was also a sense that greater strategic leadership may be needed at the institutional level.