

QAA Scotland Enhancement Themes Collaborative Cluster Final Report

Enhancing Support for Programme Leadership

An Overview of Collaborative Cluster Activity 2018-20

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Introduction

The *Enhancing Support for Programme Leadership* Collaborative Cluster brought together colleagues from across the Scottish HE sector to explore evidence for enhancement from the vantage point of programme leadership. The cluster sought to encourage sharing of practice and development of resources that linked appreciation of diverse sources of evidence with support for practical pedagogic action for enhancement.

The intended scope of involvement in the cluster was deliberately wide, encompassing programme leaders, educational developers, planners, those with responsibility for learning analytics, and other relevant roles. Working together and sharing expertise enabled us to better understand the diversity of approaches taken to programme leadership within and across our institutions and to identify areas for further learning and development.

This report provides an overview of the work of the Programme Leadership Collaborative Cluster, reflects on the process of developing the work through a pan-sector network, and considers next steps.

Framing Cluster Activity

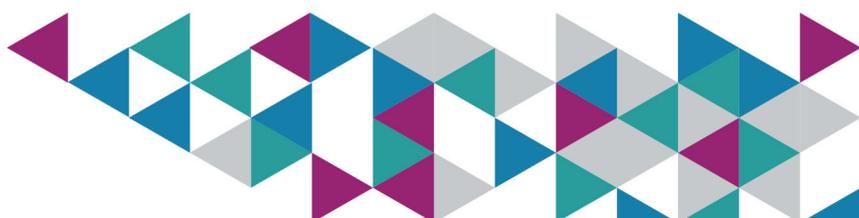
A start up workshop was held at Edinburgh Napier on 30 October 2018 to map the landscape and hone a work plan for the cluster. Two central questions emerged to frame the Cluster activity:

- What data and evidence do programme leaders routinely navigate, analyse and act on?
- How can programme leaders be better supported, for example, to use evidence to enhance the student experience?

Participants particularly highlighted the importance of ensuring the cluster created opportunities to have informal conversations about current institutional practice in these areas. As this was an emerging area of focus for many institutions, the chance to share practice and planned activity in a truly collaborative and learning-oriented way was timely and well received. The preferred mode of working was therefore through facilitated roundtable sessions, bringing together external speakers, institutional insights and direct experience from those involved in programme leadership.

There was considerable discussion about the most appropriate way to engage directly with Programme Leaders to ensure that their voices inform the work of the cluster and were heard at each roundtable. The expressed interest was in creating a forum (virtual or face-to-face) to enable sharing of practice and experience across institutions and a range of disciplines.

The interest from the Cluster start-up participants was in the conversation rather than specific outputs. However, resources that captured the development of the group's thinking





were identified as an appropriate output – an idea which coalesced into the idea of Cluster *Thinkpieces*. We also agreed to share practical resources introduced at the Roundtables to facilitate sharing of practice and maximise the use of existing materials. These were collated on the QAA Enhancement Themes website and in the *Quick Guide to the PL Cluster Resources*.

ENHANCING PROGRAMME LEADERSHIP

The range of materials produced by the PL Collaborative Cluster is available here:

<https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/current-enhancement-theme/optimising-existing-evidence/enhancing-programme-leadership>

Programme Leadership in Context

A recent study of ten years of sector-wide NSS data appears to confirm what many have long suspected – that the questions which best predict overall satisfaction are those concerning teaching quality and management of the programme, not assessment and feedback (Burgess, Senior and Moores, 2018). Analysis of data at institutional level also suggests the strong influence of responses around the nurturing of a learning community. All of these matters – the quality of teaching, students feeling part of a learning community, and especially programme management – are experienced by students primarily at the programme level. This places significant responsibility on the figureheads of these programmes, namely programme leaders.

Across the higher education sector in Scotland, a reinvigoration of programme-oriented approaches to pedagogy has led to a refocusing of attention on programme teams and programme leadership. Several different terms are used by Scottish HEIs to distinguish the programme leader role. These include programme convenor, programme director, course leader and course director (Mitchell, 2015). The term used most frequently in the relevant literature is ‘programme leader’, and for clarity this was adopted by the *Enhancing Programme Leadership* Collaborative Cluster.

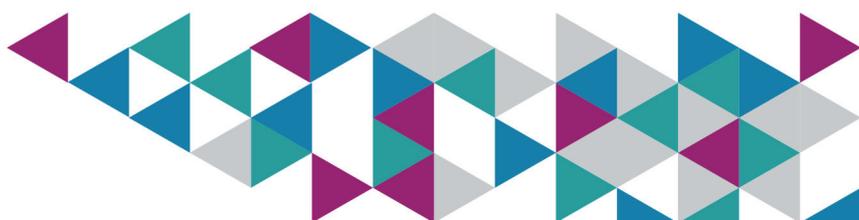
Sitting behind the top-level interest of better understanding – and enhancing – programme leadership, were three contextual areas that the Cluster considered required particular attention and critical exploration.

Understanding the evidence landscape

Through this theme, we sought to explore and potentially enhance the approaches used by programme leaders in identifying, using and interpreting appropriate evidence for enhancement data. There was interest in sharing practical examples of using evidence to enhance practice within programme contexts, including institutional case studies on using survey data and practical resources to help programme leaders and programme teams reflect on how they respond to ‘student voices’.

Creating cultures of enhancement

There was interest from the Cluster to look beyond ‘using data’ to the challenges associated





with creating cultures of enhancement at both the programme level and the institutional level. Specifically, there was interest in considering how being the figurehead for a programme can be elevated from the management domain to the leadership domain and to what extent we can ensue institutional processes support agile enhancement. Related to this we wished to consider how programme leaders play a key role in supporting and implementing strategic change, including some models for effective leadership and management.

Enhancing support for programme leaders

The final thematic area identified for exploration was how to enhance the support available across the sector for programme leaders. With institutions looking at these roles – how they are framed, how time is allocated to the work, how it is rewarded and remunerated – the Cluster provided a useful platform for sharing practice and building a network of practitioners tasked with this work. We anticipated that an informal virtual network would emerge from this work for colleagues who are working to support programme leadership development.

Significantly, the Cluster acknowledged that these three themes needed to be acknowledged at a range of levels – from the individual support for programme leaders transitioning in to the role through to institutional and sector wide change.

Programme Leadership in Context Spheres of influence and action

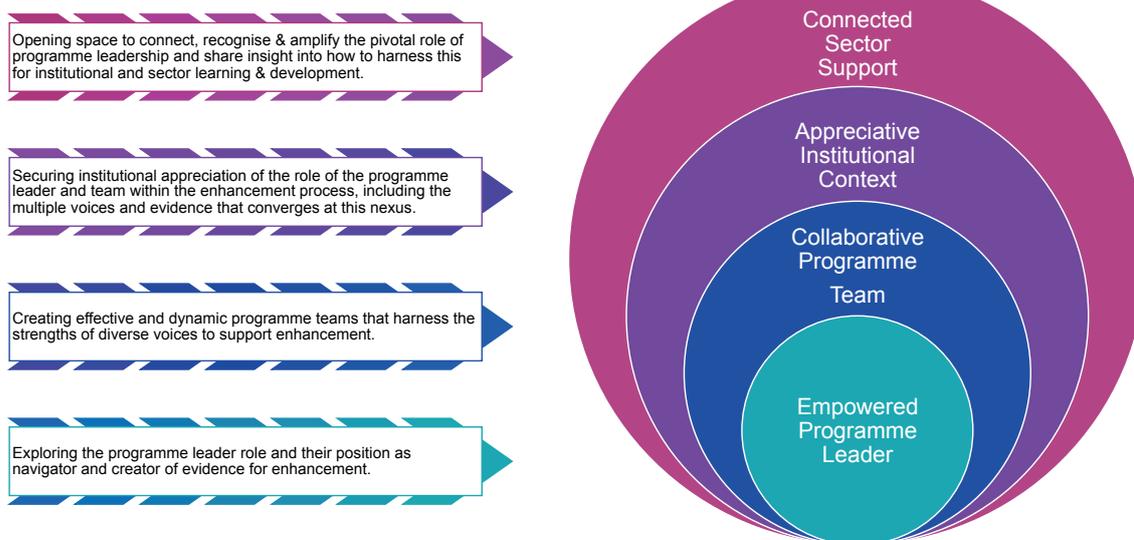


Figure 1: Programme Leadership: Spheres of Influence and Action

Reflections on Activity

The Cluster focused on creating spaces for discussion and interaction around these thematic areas, to explore and share practice and consider how to frame further action. A range of approaches were taken, including roundtable discussion and workshop formats, the writing of think pieces and efforts to create a forum specifically for programme leaders. A full list of the programme of events and the resources produced can be found at the end of this report.

Workshop delivery

Workshop formats allowed for a mixture of institutional presentation and discussion, input from beyond the Scottish sector, and opportunities for programme leaders to share their insights and experience. This made for a rich set of events and the development of





conversations over the course of the Cluster. Overall, 65 unique individuals attended cluster events, many attending multiple sessions and contributing presentations and / or written pieces to enrich the work.

The institutional sharing opened up opportunities to hear about the practical steps being taken across the sector to enhance programme leadership. This ranged from changes in institutional approaches to planning for enhancement, looking at how data sources such as institutional and national surveys fed through to action at the programme level, to practical steps to clarify the programme leader role and the reward and recognition associated with this.

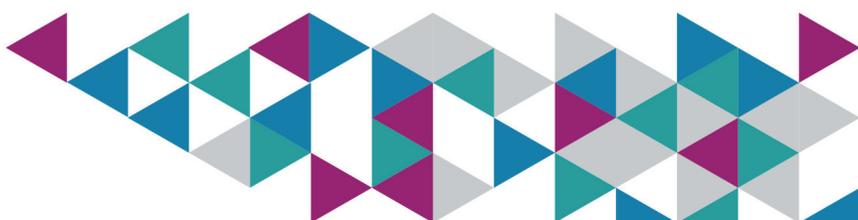
Case Study: Cluster Workshop to Explore the Data Landscape from PL Perspectives

The first substantive Cluster session focused on exploring what the data landscape looked like from a PL perspective. Institutional examples from Strathclyde, Heriot-Watt University and University of the Highlands and Islands enriched this discussion, highlighting the importance of:

- Supporting staff to engage with evidence for enhancement as a formative process, oriented-towards continual improvement rather than knee-jerk reaction to particular surveys or single sources of evidence.
- Practical approaches – and challenges – associated with engaging students in the process of using data.
- The need to ensure follow-up at programme and institutional level on what actually makes a difference – the vital step from making action plans to actually securing meaningful change.

These institutional insights were complemented by input to deepen understanding of how different evidence can be used and interpreted. The work the Scottish Planners have produced for this Theme on exploring the HE data landscape was introduced and considered from the perspective of programme leaders. This then led in to very practical insights from a panel of programme leaders from Edinburgh Napier and Heriot-Watt Universities, exploring the practical steps they take to manage a complex set of evidence and competing institutional and student demands. This discussion was brought to life by specific practical insights into making programme teams work effectively, including approaches to Student Staff Liaison Committees and engaging staff from across multiple campus locations in decisions making and the exploration of evidence.

Following these Scottish sector perspectives, the Cluster was led in a keynote workshop by Stella Jones-Devitt and Liz Austen to explore the Use and Abuse of the Student Voice. This was a challenging session, conceptually and, most importantly, practically. It sought to open space for people to consider their own practice and response to a number of scenarios related to responding student voices in a range of contexts, from formal feedback to social media and informal comments. The resources that were made available (see the publication link above) were directly transferable to the programme leader context and provide an immediately useable resource for programme leaders and for wider institutional use.





All sessions followed a similar format to that highlighted in the Case Study above – institutional perspectives, PL perspectives and external, critically reflective input linked to practical tools for action. The suite of resources is highlighted in the *Quick Guide to the Programme Leader Resources* produced by the Cluster Team.

Think-Pieces: Capturing emerging themes and conversations

Following each face-to-face workshop, participants were asked to reflect on their experience and – if they wished – to share any emerging thinkpieces. This produced a suite of thoughtful and engaging pieces on a range of topics from the use of survey data, to how programme leaders could use their skills and experience to evidence and enhance their leadership capabilities, through to very practical tips from PLs for PLs. This format – opening space for sharing experience and practice through short, reflective written pieces – added greatly to the work of the Cluster, ensuring that conversation built between events and participants had an opportunity to frame their own thinking and shape the ongoing conversation. PLs in particular valued the opportunity to gain external visibility for their work and shape action at a sector-level.

Future action

Reflecting on this approach, we would consider extending this written element further and ensure there was a support structure for developing (a) reflection on practice and (b) structured opportunities for colleagues to write-up their practice for wider sharing and dissemination. A structured process for supporting this would enable more programme leaders to participate and – practically – prioritise the time – to share their efforts in this way. This would further enhance visibility and contribute to the development of external esteem markers for those in programme leadership positions.

Programme Leaders Forum and virtual networks

A key concern from the initiation of the Cluster onwards was to open space for programme leader voices to be heard and create a platform for sharing practice. Given the pressure on PL time, we experimented with a range of approaches and platforms, including creating a PL panel for each of our face-to-face sessions and attempting to generate ongoing discussion and sharing through a virtual network. While the face-to-face sessions were very rich, open and engaging, the online space did not generate substantial interaction.

Future action:

For the next stage of work in this area, we would recommend adopting a more output-oriented approach to collaborative work between PLs, perhaps through shared action research activity, joint writing efforts, and a target of presentation at a specific event that would have external recognition, such as the Enhancement Themes International Conference.

The Virtual Network which did ‘take off’ was for those staff who support programme leadership within institutions. A number of universities are currently focusing on the PL role- how to define and support it. This group self-organised around the Cluster activity and generated a peer-support and sharing of practice group that met virtually at regular points between Cluster face-to-face sessions. Effort continued into academic year 2019-20, with the





focus on developing a programme Leadership Toolkit and a linked board game to use as part of an induction and support package for new programme leaders. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic meant that this work has been put on hold. It is recommended that this working group is refreshed and reconvened to continue to build on and operationalise the thinking and work that was generated through the original PL Cluster activity.

Outputs and ongoing work

- A full list of thinkpieces generated by the Cluster is attached in the appendix to this report.
- Practice-focused outputs from the Cluster are highlighted in the *Quick Guide to Evidence for Enhancement Programme Leadership Perspectives*.
- In addition, the Cluster leadership team synthesized learning from the Cluster approach and the specific content of the work and presented the work at the *Higher Education Institutional Research (HEIR)* conference in September 2019.

Evaluation of the Cluster

During the year of core Cluster activity (2018-19), 65 separate individuals attended the four roundtable events. An evaluation was conducted at the final roundtable, followed up with an online survey. A total of 26 individuals completed the survey, equivalent to 40% of attendees.

Of the areas covered during the roundtables, respondents noted three areas of particular value:

- how institutions are currently supporting their PLs;
- hearing directly from fellow PLs, and
- the current landscape of programme leadership in Scotland and rUK.

They reported the acquisition of new knowledge in some key areas:

- the experience of PLs across institutions (that lack of preparation for the role is universal, that issues around PL recognition are sector-wide);
- role definition (that there is huge diversity in the role, even in the same institution); and
- personal approaches to programme leadership (gaining fresh perspectives on their roles).

All respondents reported that they were now more aware of the scholarship around programme leadership, as a direct result of their involvement with the cluster. Many respondents have taken away specific points to apply in their own context, such as thinking more about how we prepare prospective PLs for the role, providing coherent support and guidance to PLs, and setting achievable goals for programme teams.

Future action:

In the year ahead, respondents would like to see any additional activity to focus on further role definition (particularly related to creating balanced workloads), further networking and dialogue, and exploring in more detail the link between data and enhancement that is embodied in the programme leader role. There was also specific interest in engaging programme leaders in scholarship activity related to their role, to facilitate sharing of practice and create opportunities for them to gain external visibility and recognition for their work.





Creating Conversation to Drive Multi-Layered Action

Emerging from this series of discussions is a clear challenge: to ensure that programme leadership is recognised across the sector for the key academic enhancement role it fulfils. This requires action across multiple layers, from individual support to institutional and sectoral recognition and visibility. Such conversations and actions need to interact, ensuring efforts to define and support individuals in a challenging role are aligned with appreciation and reward for excellence in this arena. Similarly, the alignment of programme enhancement activity requires more visible exchange and dialogue with institutional process and strategic agendas: programme action is fundamental to student experience, its leaders deserve institutional and sectorial light to be shone on them.

Any change agenda in this area must extend beyond support for programme leaders in isolation. The conversations required need to encompass multiple layers of practice and ensure a diversity of student voices and staff engagement are acknowledged, supported and resourced.

As we highlight below in our suggested *Guide to Enhancement Conversations*, enhancing programme level learning experience requires confident, engaged and valued programme leaders. Strengthening their position and ensuring they have the voice, space and sense of empowerment to lead change will require a multi-layered focus and cross-institutional collaboration.



Figure 2: Programme Leadership: A Guide to Enhancement Conversations

As our efforts through the PL Cluster have indicated, sector-wide collaboration in particular can offer a route to re-valuing programme leadership. Exploring programme leadership in a collaborative, multi-institutional context offers openings for greater depth of learning, deepening of confidence in decision making, and opportunities for programme leaders to build networks and platforms that enhance both the value and prestige of their leadership position. And, critically, it shines a spotlight on these often 'invisible superheroes', ensuring





they gain the recognition and support from across the wider university community. In doing so we open space to build creative collaboration, share expertise and support a culture that puts academic programmes, and the diversity of student and staff voices that converge at this level, at the heart of our approach to enhancement.

Concluding Thoughts and Next Steps

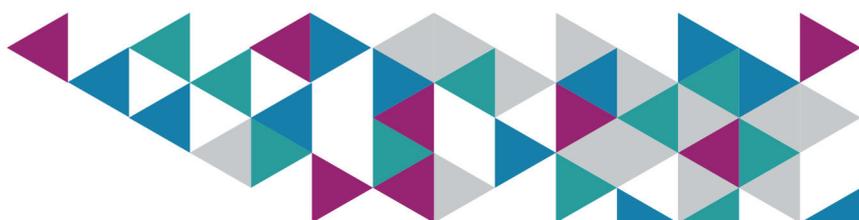
The collaborative cluster model has worked exceptionally well for this particular area of work, facilitating staff from across the Scottish sector and beyond to come together to explore an emerging area of focus. Given that most institutions were at a relatively early stage in developing their activity associated with the PL role, the open format and focus on generating conversation rather than specific ‘outputs’ was welcomed, created space for free and open dialogue, and consequently helped shape institutional as well as sector priorities in this area as the Cluster developed.

Programme leadership is increasingly recognised as a lynchpin role within institutional enhancement activity, a rise in visibility that this Cluster has arguably contributed to over the past year. The need to consider how evidence for enhancement is engaged with – and the complexity of navigating that landscape from a PL perspective – is now at the forefront of much institutional thinking. The sharing of practice through the Cluster has highlighted a clear shift in focus from seeing PLs as managers of programme to supporting them to feel empowered to shape and use the diverse suite of evidence available to them to lead programme enhancement activity.

Finally, the Cluster also opened up engagement with the Enhancement Themes to a group of staff that do not always get the opportunity to participate in external learning and teaching events and networks. The appetite for this is significant. However, finding a format that works in a multi-institutional context and that can operate within constraints of time that is a feature of the PL role needs further consideration.

To conclude, there is much to be learned and built on from this cluster in terms of the substantive focus on programme leadership and the wider piece of making collaborative activity work across the Scottish sector and beyond. While the specific Cluster is drawing to an end we anticipate continuing to share learning and practice through a number of routes:

- The continuation of an informal network of those who are supporting programme leadership at institutional levels.
- The development of a ‘toolkit’ resource for use by programme leaders.
- Disseminating, through conference papers and other platforms, of key findings from the Cluster activity.





List of Resources Produced by the Collaborative Cluster

- Programme Leadership: A Review of Evidence and an Agenda for Action by Sam Ellis (Glasgow Caledonian University)
https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/ethemes/evidence-for-enhancement/programme-leadership---a-review-of-evidence.pdf?sfvrsn=97f4c381_6
- Top Tips for Programme Leaders by Eva Malone (Edinburgh Napier University)
https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/ethemes/evidence-for-enhancement/top-tips-for-programme-leaders.pdf?sfvrsn=fb92c781_8
- Engaging Staff and Students With Data by Heather Fotheringham (University of the Highlands and Islands)
https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/ethemes/evidence-for-enhancement/engaging-staff-and-students-with-data.pdf?sfvrsn=e392c781_8
- Exploring the Data Landscape from the Programme Leaders Perspective by Christine Haddow (Edinburgh Napier University)
https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/ethemes/evidence-for-enhancement/exploring-the-data-landscape-from-the-programme-leaders-perspective.pdf?sfvrsn=f162c381_6
- Programme Leaders as Invisible Superheroes of Learning and Teaching by Catriona Cunningham (University of Stirling) and Kimberly Wilder (University of Glasgow)
https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/ethemes/evidence-for-enhancement/programme-leaders-as-invisible-superheroes-of-learning-and-teaching.pdf?sfvrsn=e862c381_8
- Student Surveys – Process to Enhancement by Maggie King (Heriot Watt University)
https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/ethemes/evidence-for-enhancement/student-surveys---process-to-enhancement.pdf?sfvrsn=f062c381_8
- Creating Cultures of Enhancement: Programme Leader or Programme Manager? By Kimberly Wilder (University of Glasgow)
<https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/evidence-for-enhancement/optimising-existing-evidence/enhancing-programme-leadership>
- Programme Leadership: Agenda for the Year Ahead by Martha Caddell & Sam Ellis
https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/ethemes/evidence-for-enhancement/agenda-for-the-year-ahead.pdf?sfvrsn=aff4c381_10
- Creating Cultures of Enhancement, Supporting Programme Leadership. Webinar presented to QAA Scotland as part of Enhancement Themes Series. November 2019. Presented by Martha Caddell & Christine Haddow.
- Presentation
https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/ethemes/evidence-for-enhancement/creating-cultures-of-enhancement.pptx?sfvrsn=b30dc881_4
- Quick Start Resource
https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/ethemes/evidence-for-enhancement/programme-leadership-in-focus-quick-start-card.docx?sfvrsn=f705c881_4

