

First things first: the first year in Scottish higher education

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Introduction

This paper takes as its theme the proverbial saying 'first things first' and applies it to the First Year Enhancement Theme in Scottish higher education.¹ Although something of a play on words, this phrase nevertheless sums up the position as we aim to refresh and integrate the previous work on Enhancement Themes within the Scottish higher education system. What are the current issues or guiding principles that are driving approaches to learning, teaching and assessment in the first year? What is the guiding principle that underpins the integration of other Enhancement Themes as they impact on the first year? The main purpose is therefore to stimulate some thinking about how we are approaching the first year and, in the course of our discussions at the 2010 Enhancement Themes Conference, share our practice.

Setting the context: current issues in higher education that impact on the first year

In order to place these questions within the current Enhancement Theme, Graduates for the 21st Century, it is worth first looking back to the words of Roy Niblett, the first professor of higher education in the UK. In a paper entitled 'The Survival of Higher Education' he wrote:

We are beginning to recognize that higher education has to become a lot more responsible both socially and personally than it has been in most colleges and graduate schools. But we have not, I think, realized the extent of the revolution required in the next fifty years to make it so: the changes of assumption called for, the changes of orientation, the changes of content. The basis on which so much of the content on which higher education has so far rested is that personal experiences and social values are not as real or in the last resort as important as physical entities, hard facts and verifiable laws.... (Niblett, 1972, p 44)

In considering this quote we might wish to think about how far we have travelled in the world of higher education since then. Have we indeed moved away from a focus on knowledge content towards personal experience and social values? Or has the transformation of higher education taken us in a different direction altogether? We cannot, of course, ignore the fact that the landscape in which higher education operates is very far removed from the world as it was nearly 40 years ago. However, in spite of this, it can be argued that something of Niblett's theme in imploring higher education to focus on the personal and social aspects of learning has indeed been fulfilled. The Graduates for the 21st Century

¹ See Appendix 1 for full list of reports in the First Year Enhancement Theme.



Enhancement Theme goes some way to recognising that graduate attributes rest not simply on the ability to master knowledge content, but perhaps more importantly on the qualities that graduates acquire during the course of their learning that are based on personal experiences and social values. These qualities or attributes are key to being able to contribute to the evolving knowledge economy and society that we now live in. The ability to adapt to changing circumstances, to work across knowledge boundaries and to become active and engaged citizens are perhaps the very kinds of qualities that Niblett would have approved of.

However, before we congratulate ourselves on what is often a much admired approach to quality enhancement in higher education in Scotland, we cannot ignore the challenges and tension that confront us. These, of course, are not unique to Scotland, but the strong focus on graduate attributes arguably throws them into greater relief. Take the increased diversity of student population that enters the first year, which is a result of the widening of participation. How can we ensure that this diverse population acquires those graduate attributes that we say are crucial to the purpose of higher education? And how do the varying personal, cultural and economic circumstances of students impact upon the development of these attributes? How do students identify with their place in higher education as **students**, rather than as, for example, consumers?

If there is one thing that has shaped our approach to the nature and purpose of the first year, it is the increased diversity of students at the point of entry to Scottish higher education. It is the widening of participation and the concomitant increased diversity of student background that has forced us to rethink the purpose of the first year.² This is, of course, not unique to Scotland, but it does raise questions about the sociological impact on higher education. In a wide-ranging review, David (2007) notes:

In the early twenty-first century, there are clearly rich and diverse studies about and on higher education within a sociological methodological framework. While many of the studies point to the malign effects of globalization and neo-liberalism on the processes of managerialism and bureaucracy, masquerading as quality assurance, within higher education they also celebrate the ways in which the new forms of 'academic capitalism' allow for a diverse and potentially inclusive form of higher education....It remains an open question about what the future of higher education may hold for subsequent generations into the twenty-first century: equity or diversity or both? (p 687)

Given the impact of the current global economic situation and the imperative that has been placed on higher education to 'deliver' on employability,³ then David's point above becomes all the more acute. It is also the case that graduate attributes are, to some extent, intended to contribute to the development of citizenship. And, of course, it is in this context that we need to consider the first year in Scottish higher education and how we can best integrate the previous Enhancement Themes under this banner so as to bring about a more 'joined-up' approach to the delivery of Graduates for the 21st Century.

Higher education is in a state of transformation across the world. The 2009 synthesis report from the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI) entitled *Higher Education at a time of Transformation: New Dynamics for Social Responsibility* draws attention in its introduction to the many challenges confronting the sector that stem from those of wider society: beyond the 'ivory tower' or 'market-oriented university' towards one that innovatively adds value to the process of social transformation. The report argues that this creation and distribution of socially relevant knowledge is something that needs to be core to the activities of universities, thereby strengthening their social responsibility (p 7). The report goes on to outline the emerging tensions that bear upon this question. These obviously apply to the Scottish higher education sector as much as any other and come together around a set of interlinked oppositional themes: reactive versus proactive institutions with respect to knowledge paradigms; the

² Gordon, G (2008) *Quality Enhancement Themes: The First Year Experience - Sector wide-discussion: the nature and purpose of the first year.*

³ QAA Scotland (2007) *Enhancing practice: Employability: Effective learning and employability*, Gloucester: QAA Scotland.

knowledge economy versus the knowledge society; universities for the public good or private good; and knowledge relevance versus competitively-driven knowledge.

Although these may at first sight appear high-order concerns and issues that are somewhat at a distance from the First Year Enhancement Theme, they do however have a considerable bearing on it. It is clear that on the back of these concerns rests what graduate attributes are **for**. How do we begin to develop in students the ability to deal with complexity, uncertainty and multi or transdisciplinarity, with the ability to integrate knowledge from different sources, and with the capacity to analyse the ethical, social and environmental implications of what they learn? It is therefore not enough to simply focus on traditional aspects of teaching, learning and assessment in higher education unless we are clear on how these aspects relate to such higher-order concerns. To do otherwise would be a failure to put first things first; the very purpose of how these core activities of higher education directly relate to the development of graduate attributes in and for a changing world.

As the GUNI report puts so well, this calls for us to be clear and to rethink the purpose of higher education; a purpose that is one of transformation rather than transmission:

The central educative purpose of HEIs ought to be the explicit facilitation of progressive, reflexive, critical, transformative learning that leads to much improved understanding of the need for, and expression of, responsible paradigms for living and for 'being' and 'becoming', both as individuals alone and collectively as communities.' (GUNI, 2009, p 11)

This notion of higher education as educating citizens with a sense of civic awareness may again seem far removed from the everyday concerns of teachers in higher education. However, it is one that is in keeping with the democratization of knowledge, something that is very much part of the tradition of Scottish higher education. This 'theme' in itself needs updating to meet the context of a knowledge society in which issues of technological citizenship are becoming more and more pressing. It is in this context that we must address the issue of the first year in Scottish higher education, for it is this that sets the tone for how we design curricula and pedagogy.

First principles

In an extensive and excellent series of reports on the First Year Enhancement Theme it is clear that there is indeed considerable innovation with regard to, for example, curriculum design,⁴ assessment and feedback,⁵ the development of academic writing,⁶ and peer support.⁷ These reports reflect the changing nature of the first year, away from a didactic model of teaching towards a focus on the learner. However, since the inception of the first year Enhancement Theme there has also been a realisation that in order to begin to develop graduate attributes that are relevant to the modern knowledge economy and society, there needs to be a greater focus on making connections between many types of knowledge. Thus while there is still a need for the development of subject-specific or professional skills, there is also a growing need to be able to work across traditional knowledge boundaries in sometimes problem-focused or creative ways.

This can be a new experience for many first-year entrants who have been exposed to traditional subject disciplines. However, this is in a process of change as the result of the Curriculum for Excellence in Scottish school education.⁸ This also places the learner centre stage with a clear steer towards the

⁴ Bovill, C, Morss, K and Bulley, C (2008) *Quality Enhancement Themes: The First Year Experience - Curriculum design for the first year.*

⁵ Nicol, D (2008) *Quality Enhancement Themes: The First Year Experience - Transforming assessment and feedback: enhancing integration and empowerment in the first year.*

⁶ Alston, F, Gourlay, L, Sutherland, R and Thomson, K (2008) *Quality Enhancement Themes: The First Year Experience - Introducing scholarship skills: academic writing.*

⁷ Black, FM and MacKenzie, J (2008) *Quality Enhancement Themes: The First Year Experience - Peer support in the first year.*

⁸ See *Curriculum for excellence building the curriculum 5 a framework for assessment: executive summary*, available at: www.ltscotland.org.uk/Images/BtC5_Summary_tcm4-582218.pdf.



development of attributes that develop aspects of confidence, contribution and civic responsibility. There is also an explicit recognition that interdisciplinary learning will form a large part of the new curricular strategy. However, it is clear that for senior school pupils, and for university entry, the most common form of study and entry route into higher education is still likely to be national subject-based examinations. This will be tempered by the need to recognise, in some form, the progressive development of the four capacities (or attributes) identified within the new curriculum. It is therefore an open matter at this stage as to how the transition stage between school education and higher education can attempt to dovetail these attributes together in order to create as an effective first-year entry as possible. What is apparent is that this is likely to be an evolving process that Scottish higher education institutions will need to take into account in adapting their first-year curricula accordingly to this new baseline for the transition into their various programmes.

Whatever the details, the broad direction is towards new approaches based on dialogical modes of learning that are focused around the notion of co-learning involving participatory and problem-oriented methods. There are also moves towards disciplinary learning that involves a reflexive engagement with the subject and its forms of knowledge. Even at the first-year level, this issue of 'knowledge about knowledge' can be introduced as a key aspect of acclimatisation to the need to consider disciplines, not as static entities, but as evolving and interdependent means of addressing matters.

However, such approaches are not without their challenges and perhaps one of the greatest is that of the risks associated with the learning process. The imperative for first-year students to make a successful start to their learning career in higher education and to develop their confidence is one that does not sit easily alongside the idea that they can benefit from exposure to risk and to open forms of learning that encourage creativity. In this respect, Smith (2005) notes that the quest for equity and efficiency can drive meaningful educational risk from the university. And yet if knowledge is to be at one and at the same time acquired and yet open to supplementation or challenge, then exposing students to the learning process in this way necessarily involves an element of vulnerability. However, as previously noted, students now come from a wide variety of backgrounds and need varying levels of support to gain confidence in their learning in the first year.

To end this section, I would wish to turn to a theme that is addressed in more detail in the next section - that is the notion of education as an initiation into practices and how this relates to personal development planning and the personalisation of learning in the first year. But before getting ahead of the argument I wish to point out what seems to be an underdeveloped aspect of recent Enhancement Theme work: a philosophical basis for pedagogy. While this may seem something of an indulgence and a little esoteric, I would wish to advance a 'first things first' basis for this argument on the grounds that learning is rooted in an understanding of what knowledge **is** and **is for**. And given that learning is a practice, then it would seem sensible to begin with the turn to explicit practice-based, learner-focused models of learning in higher education.

It is at this point I wish to draw upon a Wittgensteinian-inspired analysis of the notion of education as involving **practicing**, by Smeyers and Burbules (2010). They point out that the notion of education as an initiation into practices can, on the face of it, appear to be somewhat conservative in that it emphasizes the reproductive functions of teaching and learning. However, this need not be the case and they note that different ways of learning or enacting are very much bound up with a sense of self and identity. It is learning through practicing which can lead to a transformation of self through interactions and relations with others in the learning process. Practices can therefore transform the self by encouraging certain interpretations but also may lead to subversions that distance the person from these. In this way it is clear that engagement with the learning process is crucial in terms of the narratives that shape a relational identification with these practices. It is in this sense that this is an aspect of the 'higher' nature of higher education; that it is not just an education **into** a practice but an education **about** a practice. This more critical and reflective process of narrativization in relation to the learning process can be found in the recent attempts to encourage personal development planning as an aspect of the development of graduate attributes, although it is rarely, if ever, articulated and justified in these philosophical terms.

Personalisation and personal development planning in the first year

If we wish to engage and empower students in the first year then one way we can do this is through personal development planning^{9,10} and an associated personalisation of the curriculum.¹¹ This is very much in keeping with the view that higher education is a transformational engine for students and society in general. However, it is easy to conflate these two aspects of higher education although they are nonetheless interrelated.

Personalisation and the personal have rapidly risen up the agenda within the pedagogical discourses of higher education. This is unsurprising in a mass higher education system in which, as previously noted, questions of diversity, difference and widening participation have taken centre stage. It is also arguable that this focus on the personal is an effective counter to the notion that mass higher education has brought with it mass teaching. However, there has also been the promotion of the view that personalisation equates this with improved learning and motivation. The major pedagogical implication of such an approach is the adoption of measures designed to encourage students to be self-learning, self-actualising and self-initiating. There is the view that a homogeneous offering is not sufficient in meeting students' needs. Pedagogies that meet a diverse population of students are still nonetheless needed within the efficiency parameters that are required in terms of what is deliverable for a mass higher education system. Yet, despite the emphasis on meeting students' needs, a major driver behind the move towards personalisation is the recognition that mass higher education has also been accompanied by a concern regarding retention and motivation. This in turn has led to a focus on the extent to which students can maintain a sustained effort over the course of their studies; their ability to persevere.

Student persistence in 'staying the course' through to graduation cannot easily be pinned down to a narrow set of explanatory factors but as Harper and Quaye (2009) note, one thing is certain: those who are actively engaged in the educational process both inside and outside the classroom are more likely to be successful than their disengaged peers. Of course what we mean by 'engagement' and 'persistence' is up for grabs, particularly in today's mass higher education context. Influential writers such as Barnett (2006, 2007, 2009) suggest that the 'will to learn' is a key aspect of the student experience that needs to be encouraged and nurtured. According to this view it is not the subject of study or the acquisition of skills that educators need to focus on but rather personal aspects such as authenticity, dispositions, inspiration, passion and spirit. Of course, this is not a new idea but what Barnett has perhaps drawn attention to more than others is how this process is related to an increasingly rapidly changing and uncertain age. As he puts it:

The fundamental educational problem of a changing world is neither one of knowledge nor of skills but is one of *being*. To put it more formally, the educational challenge of a world of uncertainty is ontological in nature. (Barnett, 2006, p 51)

Barnett's call to educators in higher education to consider how they can develop curricula and pedagogies that provide students with the qualities to persist, adapt and thrive in this environment is relevant to the notion of personalisation in the first year and the development of 'the will to learn'. Much of his focus is therefore directed towards how such qualities or attributes can be developed and in doing so this connects with related concepts such as personal development planning (PDP) and graduate attributes (GAs). Simon Barrie's work has had a significant impact on thinking about the nature of generic GAs in higher education (Barrie, 2004, 2006, 2007). For, example, in developing a conceptual framework for the development of GAs, Barrie (2007) notes a series of factors including, under the heading of participation, 'generic attributes are learnt by the way students participate and engage with all

⁹ Miller, K et al (2008) *Quality Enhancement Themes: The First Year Experience - Personal development planning (PDP) in the first year*.

¹⁰ QAA Scotland (2009) *A toolkit for enhancing personal development planning strategy, policy and practice in higher education institutions*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/PDP/PDP_Toolkit_Final.pdf.

¹¹ Knox, H and Wyper, J (2008) *Quality Enhancement Themes: The First Year Experience - Personalisation of the first year*.

the experiences of university life' (pp 444-49). It is clear from this work that participation and persistence go hand in hand and, of course, these are in turn related to engagement, empowerment and ultimately student retention.

The personalisation of learning has been applied differently across and within subjects but has effectively become a 'de rigeur' aspect of the higher education system (Clegg and David, 2006). However, while this discourse aims to encourage pedagogies that promote participation and empowerment, it also normalizes the view that individual agency is paramount in terms of personal reflection, planning and decision making. In line with these developments, university educators are trying to use electronic portfolios across the curriculum (for example, PebblePad™).

These have been defined by Sutherland and Powell (2007) as: 'A purposeful aggregation of digital items - ideas, evidence, reflections, feedback etc, which presents a selected audience with evidence of a person's learning and/or ability.' In the model of e-portfolio learning below (figure 1) there is a clear linkage between collaboration, dialogue, reflection, recording and gaining feedback. However, this requires that all links in this chain are held together through a cyclical motion and should any part of the chain break then there is a breakdown in its working.

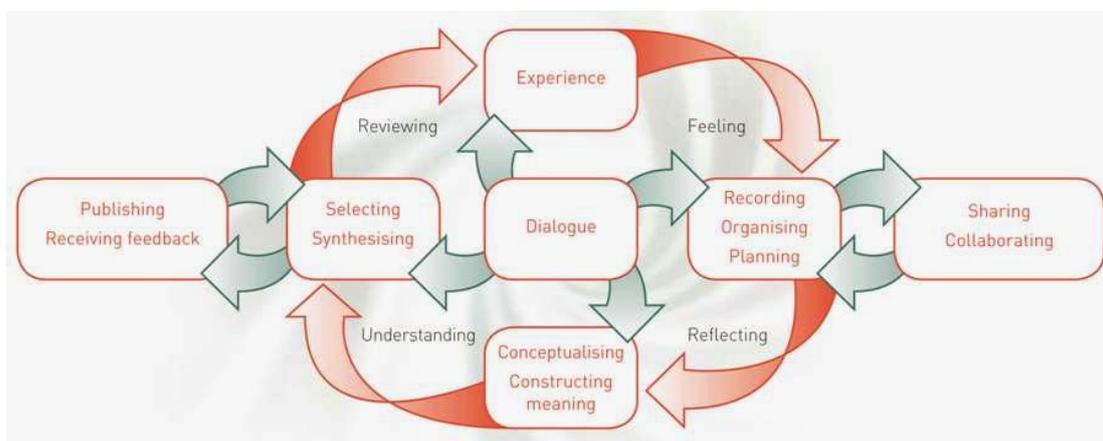


Figure 1: a model of e-portfolio-based learning, adapted from Kolb (1984) in HEFCE (2008) *JISC: Effective Practice with e-Portfolios: Supporting 21st Century Learning*, p 9

E-portfolios can therefore **facilitate** the recording, organising and storage of narratives about self which develop over time to provide a record of the learning process that each learner is engaged in. Students can therefore gain a knowledge and understanding about self and their programme of study by exploring aspects of their learning and wider life experiences.

However, these narratives about personal reflection may not sit easily alongside the aim of recording the development of GAs. The more we stress personalisation as a pedagogic tool, the more we open up learning beyond codified educational aims and outcomes and into a personalised and individualised world. This may be potentially liberating for students in some respects but it occurs at a time when most universities have modernised their operations based upon modular schemes with descriptors that require the specification of learning outcomes that are linked to GAs. This increasing bureaucratisation of the learning process as a codified product is paradoxical when set aside the ways in which students are encouraged to engage with their curricula in a constructivist manner, and in particular through modes of e-learning that are personalised and customised.

I would not wish to overstate this paradox given that students commonly receive a mixed or blended learning approach which incorporates traditional modes of learning such as lectures, with more participatory modes such as discussion groups and problem-based learning activities. Yet it is still further paradoxical that despite the shift towards these more participatory and open modes of learning,

students are nonetheless encouraged to engage in a 'guided' personalisation of their learning through an assumed reflexive development of GAs. Documenting the process in acquiring these attributes has therefore become linked to that of personal development planning portfolios.

This tension between 'top-down versus bottom-up' approaches to personalisation also leads to a range of potentially problematic issues for educators and students alike. These typically centre on matters such as national, institutional or departmental PDP policies; access to PDP records; and whether they are academic or vocationally driven. These can become dissolved in the instantiation of PDP in terms of the overall focus on the need to get such a policy translated into action, and especially via the increasing reliance on virtual learning environments. Learning in this context can become a process of managing information (including personal information) rather than discovery, insight and growth. Thus, as some have suggested, this has enabled a managerial model of learning to be surreptitiously substituted for the dialogic and critical model which characterises the ideal of learning in higher education (Lambier and Ramaekers, 2006).

These problematic issues were drawn out and articulated in interviews conducted with staff and students in the social sciences in one recent study (Moir, Di Domenico, Sutton and Vertigans, 2008 and Moir, 2009). It became clear that while PDP is almost universally accepted in **principle**, the perceptions of implementation raise some problematic **practical** issues. Perhaps this is not to be entirely unexpected given that PDP has to function as a public institutional quality enhancement measure related to such themes as employability, citizenship and the development of GAs, and yet also as something that is private and personal to the student and within their control. It is precisely this tension between the public and private aspects of PDP that is problematic. A discourse focused on personal development is something that is almost universally agreed upon as beneficial in principle. However, it is when people come to specify what this means in practical curricular and pedagogic terms that problems arise. In other words, there is an abstract notion that PDP **can** lead to improved student engagement, participation and retention but this is offset by how it is to be managed in actual practice. For some, there is a clear tension here between what they regard as the academic nature of personal development leading to commitment, retention and personal transformation and the concomitant contribution to an educated citizenry, and the underlying national imperative that requires knowledge linked to economic wealth creation. It is easy to overplay this apparent divide and I would not wish to suggest that they are somehow independent of each other. Educators and students are both well aware of the intertwined nature of these aspects of higher education but it is the configuration of PDP as an instrumental process that seems to be most problematic.

To some this process is arguably more about the legitimisation of PDP and GAs as a means of **showing** their operation within an audit-driven and accountable culture. If this were the case then this could lead to an instrumental approach to learning and may only bring about a superficial level of engagement rather than any meaningful one that can impact upon empowerment and engagement in the first year.

This view has been most strongly put by Evans (2005) in *Killing Thinking: Death of the Universities*, who writes that there has been:

...a transformation of teaching in universities into the painting-by-numbers exercise of a hand-out culture...[in which] rich resources are increasingly marginalised by cultures of assessment and regulation....Increasingly, students are being asked to pay for the costs of the regulation of HE rather than education itself.... (2005: ix-x)

But before going down the polemical path too far, is it possible to view personalisation and the focus on PDP another way, one that has the potential to deliver students who find their studies challenging, even difficult, but who nonetheless persevere?

Higher education institutions are part and parcel of the very fabric of the social, political and economic dimensions that shape our world. They do not stand outside of that world, and therefore the idea that

higher education should be concerned with the development of values is in accordance with such a view. If the case for a focus on employability relies on the notion of an adaptation to a global knowledge economy then it can also be argued that an equal case can be made for defending the inclusion of the values that encourage a more global perspective in the curriculum. This is in accord with the GUNI report referred to at the beginning of this paper and which is now very much on the higher education agenda.¹²

It is also the case that GAs are often associated with the notion of creativity and transformation. In this respect it is worth noting Mayo's (2003, p 42) invocation of Shaull's foreword to Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which he draws attention to two diametrically opposed positions on education:

Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the 'practice of freedom', the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.
(Freire, 1970, pp 13-14)

Although for some this polarisation may seem heavily ideological, it can be argued that a vision of higher education as not only contributing to the sharing of values but also the shaping of them is a desirable goal related to the notion of GAs. For a university education to be fit for purpose in a globalising world then students need 'a set of values that transform them, both now and in the future' (Otter, 2007, p 42).

This chimes with the focus on identity within higher education in the recent work of Barnett and Di Napoli (2007). In other words, there is a concern with how the personal aspect of being a student in higher education is related to GAs in a more engaged and transformational sense. It is also interesting that the recent edited work of Kreber (2008) points to the challenges of teaching and learning within the contradictions of increasing specialisation but also at the same time transdisciplinary contexts. This raises the issue of the local-global dimension to graduate attributes and how we begin to develop this so to encourage students from the outset of the first year to consider themselves and their relationship to their studies within this much broader context (for example, with respect to environmental issues and ethics, or with respect to the relationship between science and human rights).

Of course these issues cannot be addressed without bringing into question strategies for teaching, learning and assessment, and how these impact on undergraduate programmes. This has gained expression through the notion of active learning or inquiry-based learning. However, the challenge is not only to provide students with a translation of their curriculum into learning activities but for those very activities to manifestly demonstrate their relevance to the personalisation of study. In a recent study, Jones (2009) points out that generic attributes are very much context-dependent, and shaped by the disciplinary epistemology in which they are conceptualised and taught. Her study involved an examination of the teaching of generic attributes in physics, history, economics, medicine and law within two Australian universities. Skills such as critical thinking, analysis, problem solving and communication are conceptualised and taught in quite different ways in each of the disciplines. Jones goes on to suggest that a re-disciplined theorising of generic skills and attributes which frames them as part of the social practices within disciplines is required, one that integrates attributes within disciplinary epistemology.

There is a clear illustration of this point through an example drawn from my own university. In sociology we developed and introduced a module into the first year (Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework level 07) designed to encourage an appreciation of different styles of argument and debate. High-profile speakers were recruited and the students were encouraged to engage through a keypad voting system that required them to vote in groups on issues. Our aim was clear: we wanted students to discuss and appreciate the various positions, morals and ethics that can be taken up and deployed. And we wanted

¹² See 'Extreme makeover', *Times Higher Education* (4 February 2010) available at: www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=410237.



to engage them with highly topical and debatable issues of social relevance. The assessment involved a series of selected short write-ups on the topics following tutorial discussions and this was also facilitated by online discussion groups. The module was a great success in its initial pilot across the social and behavioural sciences. However, the aim was always to make it part of the general first-year undergraduate experience so as to engage students in issues that we thought would help them to appreciate how different themes could have multiple disciplinary relevances. In this way we expected to begin to develop generic attributes such as confidence in communication, flexibility in collaborating with others, seeing different points of view, and being able to appreciate complexity and the interrelated nature of 'real world' issues.

When the module was rolled out to first-year students across the School, its reception was not as enthusiastic as we had hoped for and we were left having to face up to our own lack of understanding of how first-year students engage with their studies. While the social and behavioural science students still continued to appreciate the module as an aspect of their educational experience, other groups such as sports or nursing students failed to warm to it and questioned its relevance for them. This was in spite of the inclusion of sport and health-related topics. It is evident from this 'experiment' that attempting to develop generic attributes needs careful thought, that it cannot be simply plugged into existing programmes of study, and that it needs to be developed in a discipline-context manner that may require a more thorough remodelling of the curriculum, particularly when we are trying to capitalise upon students' enthusiasm and engagement in the first year. Again this is a case of where 'first things first' needs to be tackled in terms of thinking about how students identify with what they are doing in their first year. If students are not clear at this level, not only about what knowledge **is** (that is, content and technical skills) but also **for** (that is, relevance and how to use it), then we have not set them off on the educational path that we are aiming for.

Needless to say, we have been forced to rethink how we engage students in this module so that they can begin to see that 'real world' issues involve a range of sociological, psychological, ethical, economic, and environmental concerns, to name but a few. This is not to argue in favour of students being able to deploy some glib 'fuzzy' thinking and rhetoric about the interconnected nature of knowledge, but rather that they should begin to appreciate that a strong disciplinary perspective is **required** in order to engage in transdisciplinary working. It is in this way that knowledge can be applied in order to address the complexity of problems and the diversity of perceptions of them. It is precisely because there are these different perceptions and forms of knowledge that makes for **having** to identify with, account, explain, select and modify the application of that knowledge. To us the case for the module seemed utterly apparent but we clearly underestimated the need to **demonstrate** this to first-year students and to engage with them in this kind of thinking (that is, **practice**) so that they could see its relevance beyond their immediate subject area or named programme of study. Although we ran tutorials so that students could discuss the topics of debate, we did not think about how we would get them to engage with others beyond their immediate programme of study.

Of course it is with some hindsight that we now realise that we need to put more effort into organising the module in such a way that students and staff from different disciplines be brought together as part of its operation in order to bring about a demonstration of the very practice we sought to engender. Indeed it may even force us to think about the notion of the first year as involving a distinct cohort of students who learn together. It may be that the inclusion in the module of students from later years could act as a form of active in-class peer mentoring. These students could engage with, and demonstrate to, first-year students **how** they can apply their disciplinary knowledge. This is something worthy of exploration and could act as a pedagogic model for other kinds of learning that frees up our thinking beyond simple cohort-based linear models of teaching and learning.

Conclusion

This paper has deliberately adopted a somewhat provocative tone at times. This has been done not to attack any perceived shibboleths of Scottish higher education but rather to encourage thinking and elaboration about how we tackle first things first. I noted previously that the quality enhancement approach within Scottish higher education is often commented upon and greatly admired. However, the sector in Scotland faces many of the same challenges with respect to the first year as the rest of the UK, or indeed for that matter many countries across the world. However, its approach to the intertwined nature of quality assurance and enhancement is distinctive in that it has arguably placed the former in the position of guiding the latter. This enlightened approach has freed up the creativity of educators in the higher education sector into putting their time and energy into how we enhance the learner experience. This is not to suggest that quality assurance and regulation are to be regarded as being somewhat relegated in terms of relative importance to that of quality enhancement but rather that there is a relationship between the two. The ultimate end in itself is not regulation per se, but enhancing the quality of the learning experience for students to meet the demands of an unfolding century that is increasingly being defined in terms of the development, exchange and transformation of knowledge.

I also pointed out earlier that education involves risk not only for the learner in terms of exposure to the unfamiliar and to challenging themselves, but also for educators in how they attempt to facilitate and nurture learning. The focus on enhancement in the first year has enabled us to engage with that risk and to attempt to manage it and learn from it. In the example I cited above we took a risk in trying something new in an effort to begin to develop generic graduate attributes. We tried and we learned. Had we been overly concerned with regulation and quality assurance it may arguably have led us to 'play it safe' and fall back upon what may have worked for generations of students gone by. Of course there is a balance to be struck but it is clear that we need to innovate in our pedagogical practice in order to meet the demands of a world that is very different to that of say the post-Robbins era of higher education almost 50 years ago. Then, as now, higher education was in a period of expansion and adjustment. However, the first-year student profile could hardly be more different, and the extent of that difference is perhaps comparable to what it was to Robbins 50 years before.

Even in the intervening years since Dearing there has been considerable change in the higher education landscape.^{13,14} For one thing there is a much more explicit recognition that aspects such as employability and citizenship need to be part of the learning experience from the outset. Although Dearing made some reference to personal development planning, the inclusion of graduate attributes into programmes of study has added to its pedagogical function. It is also the case that the personalisation of learning in the first year is a means of helping students themselves confront and learn from their own engagement with the risk associated with new challenges. Student can engage with personalisation through both **practicing and reflecting** upon it. This approach engages students in considering the mutual relationship between self and discipline as part of an ongoing communicative activity, rather than as simply an instrumental document-driven process. This is one of the key challenges that confront how we tackle the first year so that students can begin to acquire not only technical knowledge, but a real engagement with how to use it in relation to other forms of knowledge. For some this may be a high-order skill that can only be evidenced late in a student's progression through a programme of study. However, given the need to focus on application and transformation as related to employability and citizenship or civic responsibility then it is arguably the case that this needs to be developed **alongside** developing knowledge and skills and not as a kind of assumed maturational blossoming addendum to it. This means we need to put first things first in terms of showing how we are integrating work on the previous Enhancement Themes in such a way that the first year represents a way of starting how we mean to go on with students.

¹³ National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997) *Education in the Learning Society, Report of the National Committee* (the 'Dearing Report'), London: HMSO.

¹⁴ Watson, D (2007) *Whatever Happened to the Dearing Report? UK Higher Education 1997-2007*.

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Appendix - Quality Enhancement Themes: First Year Experience reports

All available online at: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/publications.

Alston, F, Gourlay, L, Sutherland, R and Thomson, K (2008) *Introducing scholarship skills: academic writing*.

Black, FM and MacKenzie, J (2008) *Peer support in the first year*.

Bovill, C, Morss, K and Bulley, C (2008) *Curriculum design for the first year*.

Gordon, G (2008) *Sector-wide discussion: the nature and purposes of the first year*.

Knox, H and Wyper, J (2008) *Personalisation of the first year*.

Kochanowska, R and Johnston, W (2008) *Student expectations, experiences and reflections on the first year*.

Miller, K, Calder, C, Martin, A, McIntyre, M, Pottinger, I and Smyth, G (2008) *Personal Development Planning (PDP) in the first year*.

Nicol, D (2008) *Transforming assessment and feedback: enhancing integration and empowerment in the first year*.

Whittaker, R (2008) *Transition to and during the first year*.

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