



## End of Year 2 Report for: Queen Margaret University

The key purposes of this report are to:

- provide a framework for HEIs to report on their Theme activity that has taken place over the year
- help share information across the sector on the benefits and challenges around Theme engagement.

Please report under the headings below. The report should be about 6 to 8 sides of A4 in length.

### Institutional team

Identify any changes in Theme leadership, TLG and institutional team membership since details were reported in the institutional plan developed at the start of the academic year.

Since we submitted our institutional plan for 2021-22, we have had the following changes in our institutional team for the QMU Resilient Learning Community (RLC) project:

#### Joined

- Professor Catriona Bell, Director of Learning Enhancement and Academic Development – taken over role as Theme Lead for QMU from Nov 2021.
- Dr Rachael Davis, Lecturer in Psychology, Sociology and Education – joining institutional team from August 2022 onwards.

#### Left

- Dr Karl Johnson, Lecturer in Psychology, Sociology and Education – stepped down from institutional team due to new role and commitments

### Evaluation of activities/outcomes

To make evaluation processes more accessible and user friendly, we have attempted to simplify (not minimise) the evaluation reporting process into 7 key questions (see below). Prior to completing these, it would be useful to refer to the QAAS website resource: [A Guide to Basic Evaluation in HE](#) (specifically, Section 8, Summary overview on page 23, and the Evaluation Checklist – Appendix A, on pages 28-29).

Please report each activity/intervention against the following questions in the Evaluation part of the template.

N. B. You may have already realised some of your objectives and/or these might be ongoing, so please delineate each question according to whether activities or interventions have been completed already in this reporting year or are in process.

(Easiest way is to delete **either/or** options highlighted in **red** in questions below):

## Evaluation

Please complete the following 7 questions for each activity or intervention (N.B. Just cut and paste the table below as many times as necessary)

Title of project/activity
<b>Lonely Learning and learning to be lonely: a study of student resilience and challenge during COVID-19 lockdown</b>
1. What change <b>has been / is being</b> made? (Brief description(s) of overall activity/intervention)
<p>The overall purpose of our project is to explore student experiences of loneliness and isolation and identify strategies that may have been used, and may be used in the future to manage these experiences.</p> <p>Our logic model is provided below:</p> <pre> graph LR     Issue[Issue - students experiencing loneliness and isolation] --&gt; Inputs[Inputs - staff resource; participant engagement with questionnaire and focus groups]     Inputs --&gt; Outputs[Outputs - comprehensive research report and conference presentations plus identified priority areas of focus for Year 2]     Outputs --&gt; Outcomes[Outcomes - increased understanding of how to tackle loneliness and isolation and related action]     Outcomes --&gt; Impact[Impact - reduced loneliness and isolation amongst our students]     </pre>
<b><u>What change has been made? (work that has been completed)</u></b>
<p>A highly successful mixed methods research project formed the key component of our work during Year 2, and this was led by two part-time Research Assistants (Linnea Wallen and Mhairi Scally-Robertson) together with our Head of Psychology, Sociology and Education (Dr Olivia Sagan). This project included the design, delivery and analysis of both student and staff questionnaires, and subsequent follow-up student focus groups as detailed below.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A <b>student questionnaire and focus groups</b>, open to all undergraduate and taught postgraduate students and to doctoral candidates.</li> <li>• A <b>staff questionnaire</b>, open to all academic and professional service staff. This questionnaire invited staff to reflect on various aspects of the student experience related to loneliness and isolation. It did not address staff views on their own feelings of loneliness and isolation.</li> </ul>

Robust quantitative and qualitative data analysis was undertaken by the research team. The questionnaire and focus group data were then considered by the institutional Enhancement Themes project team alongside other data that QMU holds on student experiences of loneliness and isolation, for example NSS and other survey results. Whilst the NSS and our internal student experience survey (the QSS) do not ask directly about loneliness and isolation, some of the question banks provide helpful related information. The qualitative comments from these surveys are particularly useful.

The findings from this research project have been written up as a comprehensive report which is attached as an appendix, and we would be delighted to share this output with the sector via the Enhancement Themes website. Furthermore, this work been presented at the following events:

- Sector wide Enhancement Themes 2022 conference (oral presentation, June 2022)
- QMU interdisciplinary conference on Social Justice and Civic Society (poster presentation, May 2022)
- TRIUMPH - Children and Young People's Mental Health Early Career Researchers' Forum (oral (online) presentation, September 2021)

The Executive Summary of the research report is included below. This summarises key findings from the project which have subsequently informed our priority areas of focus for Year 3. The full research report has been shared with QAAS as a separate file that can be uploaded to the Enhancement Themes website.

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### **Research Report: Executive summary**

There is evidence of loneliness amongst students pre-dating the pandemic which has variations depending on demographics (e.g., level of study, subject of study, gender, age) and recent studies have shown that such experiences increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Conducted under the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Enhancement Theme 'Resilient Learning Communities', the aim of this study was to better understand the experiences of social isolation and loneliness amongst students at Queen Margaret University during 2020/21. A psychosocial approach was used with a mixed-methods research design. Data was generated through questionnaires and online focus groups.

Quantitative findings indicate

- Students' feelings of social isolation during COVID-19 were significantly predicted by the extent of social isolation felt before the onset of the pandemic, as well as loneliness experienced in the past week. Similarly, loneliness during COVID-19 was significantly predicted by levels of loneliness experienced prior to the pandemic, as well as social isolation experienced in the past week.
- The COVID-19 lockdown phase had a notable effect on feelings of loneliness and social isolation.
- Students living on QMU campus felt less socially isolated but lonelier than those living at home with a partner, parents or guardians. However, there was no notable difference between students living on QMU campus compared to off-campus shared accommodation with others, or on their own.
- Students in level 1 are marginally lonelier than students in level 2, whilst significantly less lonely than those in level 3 and 4. Students in level 1 are significantly more socially isolated than those in level 2 and 3, but not level 4.

Qualitative findings show that

- Students' experiences of loneliness and social isolation were predominately based in a lack of connection to their peers and a lack of a sense of belonging to the university community.
- Underpinning these experiences were difficulties in building relationships online and missing opportunities to engage in co-constructed learning with their peers in physical spaces.
- Students coped with their feelings of loneliness and social isolation in diverse ways. Coping mechanisms broadly involved 'keeping busy' (physically, intellectually, socially) and using 'distractions'.

This study has informed the next phase of the Enhancement Theme at QMU, where we will focus on strategies to:

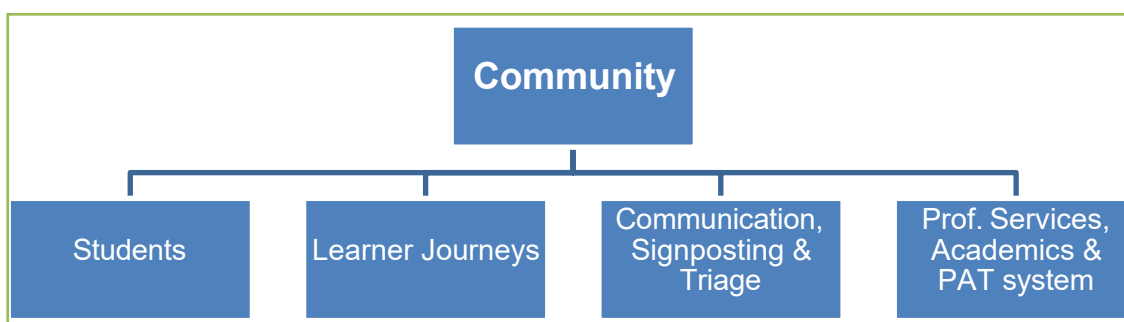
- Develop a sense of community.
- Understand what community means amongst students.
- Support Personal Academic Tutors (PATs) to support their students.

### **What change is being made for Year 3?**

Year 3 project activities will build on the findings from the Year 2 research project, and will particularly focus on the importance of community and what this means to our students.

Potential elements of community are summarised in the diagram below, and we will recruit part-time student partners to work with the project team to:

- Identify and understand what community means amongst different cohorts of QMU students.
- Co-create a range of learner journey maps for different cohorts of QMU students (for example direct entry students, international Masters students, students with caring commitments etc.).
- Co-create interventions (including communication and signposting interventions) that will positively impact the sense of community for different cohorts of QMU students.
- Identify how the QMU Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) system could be enhanced from the student perspective.



We have also created a working group that will focus on enhancement of the PAT system. and this includes the following colleagues:

- Student President - Academic Life
- Head of Student Services
- Assistant Secretary, Governance and Quality Enhancement
- Director of Academic Development and Learning Enhancement
- Representatives from our Professional Services teams

- Experienced Personal Academic Tutors.

2. Why **have we made /are we making** it? (Rationale for the change)

The findings of our Year 2 research project have informed these developments and have identified the need to understand what community means to different cohorts of QMU students, and to co-create interventions that support the development of community at our institution. This project has also identified the key role that Personal Academic Tutors can play in mitigating the feelings of loneliness and isolation amongst students, and signposting them to appropriate support. As a result, a further priority for Year 3 of the project will be to enhance our Personal Academic Tutor system, with a particular emphasis on improving the consistency in experience of the PAT system for individual students.

We have also been developing our [QMU Student Experience Strategy \(SES\) 2021-26](#) over the past academic year, and findings from the RLC research project have complemented this. As a result, we have dedicated strands and themes within the SES that relate to both community and co-creation with students, and these include the Learner Journey; Healthy Universities; Students as Partners and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI).

Therefore, we plan to strategically align Year 3 RLC project activities with our QMU Student Experience Strategy delivery plan, and related activities, interventions and outputs will benefit both of these strategic institutional priorities.

3. What difference **has occurred/will hopefully occur** as a result? (Tangible change made successfully or envisaged)

The most important difference that we hope will occur is a reduced detrimental impact of loneliness and isolation on the student experience.

We expect that the following outcomes will underpin this overall objective:

- Increased student awareness of/engagement with available support services, resources/activities and approaches/strategies to address feelings of loneliness and isolation.
- Increased staff awareness and signposting of support services, resources/activities and approaches/strategies to address students' feelings of loneliness and isolation.

For example, we will recruit student partners to co-create learner journey maps for different cohorts of QMU students, and to identify and understand what community means to these students as part of this process.

These outputs will help us to identify pinchpoints and key issues relating to loneliness and isolation for our students, as well as interventions and coping strategies that our students have found to positively impact their experiences.

They will also help us to identify potential priority cohorts of students for whom we can then develop targeted interventions to help signpost them to available support and community building activities or groups.

We anticipate that these outputs will also raise awareness of available support and activities to PATS and staff, thus assisting them signposting these to students.

4. How **do we/will we** know? (How is the change measured)

We will collaborate with our Students Union and future RLC student project members to design and implement further student-led activities towards the end of Semester 2 in order to evaluate potential changes in awareness of support services and resources amongst both staff and student, and approaches/strategies used by students. This may include focus groups and post-it note activities on our canteen, but we will co-create our approach to this with our students.

We have embedded a new approach within our Student Experience Strategy Delivery Plan which includes the addition of an 'evidence' row where we measure progress against our annual internal QMU Student Survey (QSS) questions.

We will compare NSS and QSS results across academic years to identify any changes relating to loneliness and isolation measures. We also survey students shortly after induction in the QMU Entrants Survey (QES) and we also surveyed research students as part of the national benchmarked Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) in 2022, so again we will be able to triangulate relevant data with evidence gathered from our co-created RLC project activities.

To date we have not investigated whether loneliness/isolation is the reason for some student deferrals/withdrawals, but we now plan to undertake a search of qualitative comments within our database for key words such as 'lonely', 'isolated', 'disconnect', 'lack of...' in the reasons for withdrawal or deferrals, and we will monitor any changes in this across academic years.

We acknowledge that it may be difficult to gauge progress, and also that it will not be possible to determine with any degree of certainty the extent to which feelings of loneliness and isolation are directly linked to the circumstances arising from COVID restrictions. We do, however, anticipate that we can evaluate whether or not there has been an increased awareness and signposting to available support amongst students and staff.

5. Who **has been/is** involved in making any judgements? (Who decides on effectiveness)

Our Institutional Team has oversight of judgements on effectiveness. The Team reports to the Student Experience Committee, allowing for wider input from academic and professional services staff, and students. Several members of the institutional team are also part of the Student Experience Strategy (SES) delivery team, and have thus been able to share relevant findings from the RLC project to inform the priorities and future direction of the SES delivery plan.

6. Any lessons learned to apply already? (Applied ongoing learning)

A key lesson learned has been the benefit of channelling resources from our RLC budget into one larger scale project with a robust project design and an adequately resourced and appropriately skilled delivery team. As part of this we have employed part-time subject experts to design and embed a mixed methods research project into Year 2 activities. We are delighted that this has resulted in the production of a robust evidence base on which we can now iteratively build our Year 3 activities, as well as excellent outputs that will benefit both our institution and the sector.

We have been interested to note the high level of student and staff engagement with the topic of loneliness and isolation, as evidenced by the questionnaire response rates and

the number of students indicating that they were happy to be contacted for the focus groups (please see linked Research Report for further details).

We have also been interested to identify the importance of the Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) system in potentially mitigating the impact of loneliness and isolation for our students.

7. Any things you **have stopped/need to stop** doing? (Any unsuccessful elements)

We have faced some unexpected challenges in terms of HR contracts for recruiting student partners for our project. We now have a potential solution for this, but it has delayed the recruitment of our student partners (we had planned to have student partners in post by May 2022, but this will now be delayed to September/October 2022)

We recognise that there is scope to further engage the wider QMU community with the Enhancement Themes work and activities (both internal and external), so will be reviewing our communication channels for this, including our Enhancement Themes intranet site, during Year 3.

### **Dissemination of work**

Which mechanisms have been most effective in disseminating outcomes and resources internally, and to the sector? Please provide examples.

If there are materials and resources you can share with the sector, please provide details below.

- Our Institutional Team members act as Themes Champions with a remit to raise awareness of the Theme within their local academic and professional services Divisions.
- The Institutional Team reports to our Student Experience Committee and also to the School Academic Boards through SEC update papers.
- Emails with requests to cascade to wider teams via School meetings etc
- Conference presentations (oral presentation and poster presentations) have been shared both internally and at sector level

Future plans:

- Our Year 2 Research Report (with embedded Executive Summary) will be shared internally via relevant committees, our Moderator e-mail system, and our Enhancement Themes intranet site. It will also be shared as a resource for the sector and we would be delighted if this were hosted on the ET website.
- Our project research team are currently working on two papers that will be submitted to peer-reviewed journals (one on the topic of community and the other on international students) with possible further publications in future.
- We will also working in partnership with our 'Student President - Academic Life' to explore ways of engaging more widely with our undergraduate and taught postgraduate student community.
- We will also embed key findings from our project into a forthcoming Festival of Learning for colleagues at QMU.

## Collaboration outwith your institution

How have you collaborated with other institutions? This could be informally by growing networks or contacts, or more formally for example, through collaborative clusters or sector work. If you have been collaborating with others, briefly explain what this has involved and what have been the benefits and challenges.

QMU colleagues, including members of the Institutional Team, have engaged with sector work and activities including the Enhancement Themes conference in May 22 (which 7 colleagues attended, including our Deputy Principal), sector evaluation workshops, and collaborative cluster activities.

Whilst we do not monitor colleagues' engagement with that work directly, we are aware that there has been particular interest in two of the collaborative clusters:

- 1) Decolonising the Curriculum: We have shared the Anti-Racist Curriculum resources directly with fourteen colleagues who are all actively working on decolonising the curriculum within their disciplines. Colleagues have reported very positively on both the resources and the QAA webinar they attended on that topic
- 2) Microcredentials: One of our Senior Leadership Team (Prof David Stevenson) has actively engaged with the Microcredentials Collaborative Cluster, including attending the online event in January 2021 which he reported had some useful speakers and engendered some useful discussions. He also reports that he has read most of the outputs published by the cluster, and some of the recommendations in these have indirectly influenced how QMU has developed our internal process for operational/quality management of these courses.

## Supporting staff and student engagement

How have staff and students been supported to engage in Theme activities? Please provide examples.

Several colleagues have attended the excellent sessions by Stella Jones-Devitt and Liz Austin, including the Sensational Surveys workshop and Theory of Change Sessions at the ET Conference, and we are now using this learning to inform our approaches.

We also strategically decided to send a team of five students and staff to the QAAS 'Focus on Professional Services' event in April 2022 in order to develop our early thoughts around co-creating a plan for enhancing our Personal Academic Tutor system, and thus help to mitigate the feeling of loneliness and isolation for our student. This team comprised representatives from our Students Union, Postgraduate student community, and three senior colleagues from our Student Services, Academic Development, and Governance and Quality Enhancement teams. The 'away day' format of the event catalysed some extremely fruitful discussions and planning activities, and has informed the co-creation of a plan for enhancing the consistency of the PAT system through a phased approach. We subsequently submitted this plan to our Student Experience Committee in May 2022, and this was approved without any conditions. We will therefore embed related activities into Year 3 of our RLC project, and will ensure that Student Services and Academic colleagues, PATS, Student Union, Class Reps are represented in this work.



In addition, please see the comments above on committee remits and Team members' engagement as Divisional Champions.

All QMU staff and students have been invited to engage with this particular Theme through the questionnaires on loneliness and isolation. Within the recruitment materials, and Participant Information Sheets, we raised awareness of the Themes.

Staff are guided to the Themes, in some cases, as an outcome from the Performance Enhancement Review (PER) process. This has led to at least one new member joining the Team. Staff are also encouraged to engage with the Themes through our Annual Monitoring and review processes.

However, we are aware that we could do more to raise awareness of the Theme activities amongst both staff and students, and this will be an area of priority focus on Year 3. We will explore how we can work closer with the Students Union for dissemination and 'bitesize' chunk of information being shared in an accessible and eye-catching format.

## **Processes**

What are you learning from the processes, approaches and structures you are using to support this Theme?

How will this report be used/distributed within your institution?

For this particular Theme we established a core research group to lead on the development of the mixed methods research project. We have found this approach to be of value, as it has ensured we have both subject and methodological expertise. Our researchers have involved the wider Team in all key decisions, thereby ensuring that there is a good balance of more focussed work and wider engagement.

We have welcomed the publication of The Guide to Effective Evaluation in HE, and we have used this to inform our projects in Year 2 of the Theme. On a broader institutional level, staff and students involved in our Student Experience Committee projects will be directed towards this resource to help us build evaluation into all of our activities.

### **How we will use/distribute this report**

This report will be published on our Enhancement Themes Intranet site, which is accessible to all staff, and also distributed through an 'All staff' and 'all students' e-mail update via our Moderator system. It will also be shared through senior committees, including the Student Experience Committee, School Academic Boards and Graduate School Academic Board.

## **Looking ahead**

In session 2022-23 we will be starting to consider what the next Enhancement Theme might focus on. We are interested to know about the discussions, hot topics and issues that are emerging in your practice and gaining increasing attention. Please share your thoughts and views below.

Inclusive Curriculum (and Decolonising the Curriculum)

Microcredentials  
Authentic Assessment  
Shaping a better world locally & globally (including alignment with graduate attributes)

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<b>Date:</b>	June 2022