

Resilient Learning Communities

Institutional Plan for: The Open University in Scotland

This document will form your year 2 plan and should be around three to four sides of A4. You can find your year 1 plan through this <u>web page</u>.

Context

Provide any statements that might be helpful in explaining your institution's context and approach and how this plan supports the achievement of institutional priorities. Any context statement could draw on salient points from the previous year's learning/outcomes from Theme work and reflect any changes in the strategic direction of your institution.

Enhancement theme activity in the OU in Scotland is led and coordinated by the Access, Participation and Success Scotland (APSS) team. This institutional plan is aligned with our Access, Participation and Success Scotland Plan, which was reviewed for 2021 and embeds enhancement activity as a core principle. The APSS Plan sets out the guiding principles that underpin our activity, as follows:



The creation of our Enhancement Theme Institutional Group (ETIG) in Year One has facilitated conversations about initiatives being developed and delivered across the University that support the theme that the APSS Team would not otherwise have been aware of. This key learning from

Year One confirms that there is already a wealth of activity happening within the University to support resilience within our student body and therefore we will continue this collaborative approach moving forward; ensuring we have structures in place to make explicit the work that is happening within the organisation that supports Theme activity and the Access, Participation and Success Scotland (APSS) plan.

Institutional team

Please specify for each member whether staff or student and for staff, their role title. Where the Theme Leaders' Group (TLG) staff or student nominee is unable to attend meetings, an alternate can attend on their behalf.

Institutional lead	Shona Littlejohn: Depute Director (Student Experience & Widening Access)
TLG staff representative	Viki Soper: Access, Participation & Success Officer
TLG student representative	TBC (Open University Student's Association rep. for Scotland has stepped down and cooption has not yet happened)
Enhancement Theme Institutional Group (ETIG) members	Ruth Whitney: Access, Participation & Success Manager
	Carla Anderson: Senior Manager, Student Support (Operations)
	Eddie Tunnah: Senior Careers and Employability Manager
	Moira Weir: Information Analyst
	Sylvia Warnecke: Staff Tutor
	Janet Hughes: Staff Tutor
	Sally Crighton: Staff Tutor and Associate Lecturer
	Gill Ryan: Access, Participation & Success Officer
	Lorraine Malcom: Project Development Manager
	Kitty Chilcott: Staff tutor
	Andy Berry: Manager, Student Support (Operations)
	Patty Watters: Manager, Student Support (Operations)

Overall outcomes/activity

Are there any changes to your key priorities, outcomes and delivery activities that you identified at the start of the Theme?

The key strategic priority for The Open University continues to be student success. It is through our scale, reach and our ability to support students to succeed that we are able to achieve our positive impact on society and the economy. A key priority for us for the duration of the theme remains focusing activity on initiatives to improve student success.

Our key priorities that were identified at the start of the Theme have not changed. In line with our APSS Plan, our Enhancement activity will:

- Lead a strong evidence-based enhancement/continuous improvement culture within OUiS
- Work pro-actively with QAA (Scotland) and Scottish HE sector to influence and lead on activity relevant to part-time/distance learning
- Ensure that our enhancement activity is informed by and created with our students
- Work with faculties and units to influence scholarship around the 2020-23 Enhancement
 Theme
- Promote a culture of external engagement, ensuring OUiS' enhancement work is shared across the sector and that we learn from others
- Continue development of our 'Fika' sessions with expansion via online platform to reach a wider audience

A key focus for us of Year Two and Three of the Theme will be to work pro-actively with the Scottish HE sector to influence and lead on activity relevant to part-time/distance learning. Our focus for Year One of the Theme was raising awareness of the Theme within the OUiS meaning that our activity was primarily internally facing. For the remainder of the Theme, we intend to engage further with the sector to collaborate and influence on activity.

Year 2 outcomes/activity

In answering the following, identify what is continuing from year 1 and what is new: What are your key priorities?

What outcomes do you want to achieve?

What activities will you deliver to achieve your key priorities?

Year One of the theme was focussed on scoping, research and development work to underpin the Theme and beyond. A key focus was building relationships within the OUiS to identify the substantive focus for our project work. Through the creation of our Enhancement Theme Institutional Group (ETIG) we have been able to successfully identify a number of different projects and areas of focus for our Year Two activity.

These include:

- Forced migration project development
- Sense of Belonging Toolkit
- OpenLearn materials for Students in Secure Environments
- Phase 3 of the 'Supporting Students from Deprived Backgrounds' project
- EmployAbility programme

- Student community & Computing Club
- Big Blether Series
- Concurrent Study in Education Studies (Primary) Qualifications

Our priorities for Year Two of the Theme are to progress these initiatives to allow for robust evaluation in Year Three.

Evaluation

How do you intend to evaluate your year 2 projects and activities?

Prior to completing this section, 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 complete briefly the following 5 questions for each activity or intervention (N.B. Just cut and paste the table below as many times as necessary). This will help you complete your end of year 2 report.

Title of project/activity

Forced Migration project development (Lead: Gill Ryan)

What change is being made? (Brief description(s) of overall activity/intervention)

We are currently scoping three projects with the aim of piloting them in the next academic year (Aug 2021-July 2022).

Pathways into study

Provide study support from an OU tutor to develop readiness for higher education, alongside guidance on course choice and funding options; including entry level Access Courses and micro-credentials, or OU modules. This strand would be targeted at people who have language fluency but may need to develop English for academic purposes and skills for online learning, with an initial cohort of 20 participants. We are partnering with the Scottish Refugee Council and Bridges Programmes to identify and recruit participants. The programme will commence in October 2021.

Skills for employability

Provide supported access to existing OU resources on employability and digital skills, with wraparound ESOL support and career mentoring to an initial cohort of 20 participants. This strand of the project would focus on upskilling or reskilling people who may be currently unemployed or underemployed.

Community-based ESOL resources

This scoping is linked to a community languages project and is seeking to build links with minority communities in Glasgow specifically. This project will take place over a longer term and we aim to produce free online resources on our OpenLearn platform co-produced with communities.

Why are we making it? (Rationale for the change)

In January 2021, we invited third sector and community groups that support forced migrants in Scotland to a virtual roundtable event called Open to People. We invited them to contribute ideas for how the OU in Scotland could support their work and partner with them to improve learning opportunities for these communities. The projects build on the ideas and contributions of participants, who identified three key gaps in provision that the OU's expertise in online learning could help address.

We will work with the Scottish Refugee Council and Bridges Programmes to identify participants and support them to build their study skills and enhance their employability, contributing to the outcomes of the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy 2018-22. This activity also contributes to the OU's bid to become a University of Sanctuary. Engaging with forced migrant communities also aligns with priorities in

our Access, Participation & Success Scotland Plan and Outcome Agreement to make learning accessible to the widest range of learners, with specific targets for BAME and SIMD20 communities and for disabled people. Forced migrants are disproportionately represented in all three groups and experience intersectional disadvantage as a result.

What difference will hopefully occur as a result? (Tangible change envisaged)

We envisage that participation in the programme will support learners to integrate into Scottish society through accessing education and employment. The Pathways into Study programme will develop the skills and confidence participants will need to succeed in higher education. We intend to track learner journeys through the programme and into formal study with the OU.

The learning from the pilots will inform how we respond and scale up the project in subsequent years. It will also help us identify what works and how the model can be adapted to meet the challenges that impact the most disadvantaged groups from accessing education or employment in Scotland.

The pathways piloted in 21/22 will form part of an online toolkit to be hosted on our free OpenLearn platform, along with learning, case studies, co-created resources and other outputs from the project. This will remain accessible to organisations and individuals beyond the lifetime of this project to extend its impact. Our goal is to provide tools and learning pathways for forced migrant communities to access education and employment.

How will we know? (How the change is measured)

Evaluation will be key to the project, and we will build in capacity for the OU and partner organisations to track participant journeys, numbers and outcomes, create case studies and provide analysis to ensure the learning from each strand of the project is captured and responded to. The evaluation will ultimately be used to inform the content of the toolkit.

Title of project/activity

Sense of belonging Toolkit (Lead: Gill Ryan)

What change is being made? (Brief description(s) of overall activity/intervention)

The Sense of belonging toolkit is an output from a collaborative cluster from the previous theme, but the work fits in with current theme. The toolkit is focussed on creating a sense of belonging in online communities. It is an existing resource but needs updating with learning from COVID and we need to promote it more effectively to ensure that the learning from it can be embedded in practice across the sector.

Why are we making it? (Rationale for the change)

The changes to the resource are being made as a response to COVID-19 which has highlighted issues of isolation and loneliness within our student body and to tie-in with the current Theme activity within OUiS.

What difference will hopefully occur as a result? (Tangible change envisaged)

We hope that the resource will become widely used across the sector, that it will support educators in taking their teaching online, and will lead to an improved sense of belonging for students in online learning communities.

How will we know? (How the change is measured)

Measuring the impact of the resource has been challenging so far as there is no requirement to enrol before using the toolkit so we are not able to obtain data as to how many people have accessed it or ask users for feedback. Part of the work being done under this current Theme will be to incorporate a feedback loop into the toolkit to provide us with clear data as to how it is being used and its impact.

Title of project/activity

Students in Secure Environments – Open Learn Materials (Lead: Viki Soper)

What change is being made? (Brief description(s) of overall activity/intervention)

The Open University in Scotland is collaborating with Fife College who are the learning providers in prisons in Scotland to make our free Open Learn resources available in an offline context on computers in the Learning Centres in prisons.

Why are we making it? (Rationale for the change)

There are always more applications to the Higher Education Access Board to study in a secure environment with the Open University than can be accepted in each academic year. This evidences the need for additional learning resources within prisons. Provision of Open Learn materials within the prison environment helps to address this need and encourage more learners to consider higher education as a possibility whilst learning study skills. We also want to develop specific pathways of OpenLearn resources to support specific student groups, such as developing a suite of resources tailored for women following the reconfiguration of the women's estate.

What difference will hopefully occur as a result? (Tangible change envisaged)

We hope that the resources will provide a new method of learning for students in secure environments; developing study skills and getting an understanding of what studying with the Open University is like through tasters of module materials. We envisage the resources providing opportunity for those who are unsuccessful in their application to study at degree level to maintain an interest in learning and build a portfolio of completed courses to support future applications to study.

How will we know? (How the change is measured)

We will gather feedback from learners about the resources, including how their learning was impacted by the offline environment and the effectiveness of translating the resources to an offline context. In addition we will seek input from Fife College staff regarding how learners are responding to the materials and how they can be used to support the Fife College curriculum as well as access to Higher Education through the Higher Education Access Board.

Title of project/activity

SIMD20 project (Lead: Viki Soper)

What change is being made? (Brief description(s) of overall activity/intervention)

As part of our 2017-20 Enhancement Theme activity, we researched and produced a report to better understand the extent of the SIMD20 attainment gap and to gather evidence to inform targeted interventions to support student success. This project was formed in three phases; research activity,

collation and analysis of data and designing potential interventions based on work completed in phases 1 & 2 to reduce isolation and facilitate a sense of belonging.

Why are we making it? (Rationale for the change)

We have now completed phases 1 & 2 of the project and need to move onto phase 3 – disseminating the report outcomes and designing interventions based on the collated data and analysis.

What difference will hopefully occur as a result? (Tangible change envisaged)

The key findings from phases 1 & 2 of the project underscore the importance of well-signposted, proactive student and academic support services that reduce isolation and facilitate a sense of belonging. We hope that design and implementation of targeted interventions will support this activity to support student success.

How will we know? (How the change is measured)

The most recurrent services recommended by the research participants included the formation of a peer-to-peer/student buddy system and an AL named contact/mentoring support system to provide consistency through the learner journey along with other co-curricular support mechanisms, all mainstreamed to avoid stigma as part of every student's tailored learning and support plan. Inclusive curriculum design and early promotion of IT training/module website navigation & study skill sessions were also recurrent themes. Design and implementation of one or more of these services will allow us to evaluate impact.

Title of project/activity

EmployAbility programme (Lead: Eddie Tunnah)

What change is being made? (Brief description(s) of overall activity/intervention)

EmployAbility are a not for profit organisation that offers and charges employers for their consultancy services, so that they can provide free support to further the rights of disabled people. They are offering a collaboration with 10 universities in Scotland for a reduced charge to support disabled students and alumni. Three activities will be delivered as part of this collaboration:

- 1. Three dedicated and tailored one-hour webinar sessions for Scottish university students will be delivered. These sessions will be run twice to maximise attendance.
- 2. Student 1:1 sessions will be offered to provide individualised support and advice.
- 3. A two-part Empowering your students webinar will be run for staff.

A key feature of EmployAbility's offer is an advocacy role around issues of disclosure and reasonable adjustments. We will be implementing the service as an enhanced offering to our students.

Why are we making it? (Rationale for the change)

The service will provide additional support to enable disabled students and alumni to achieve positive career and personal development outcomes.

Positive employability outcomes for disabled qualifiers are significantly lower than those for their non-disabled peers.

• 59% of disabled OUIS respondents to the Employability of Qualifiers (EQS)* surveys of 2017, 2018 and 2019 (combined) were in employment and 36% of these were employed in professional occupations.

- 78% of non-disabled OUiS respondents to the EQS surveys of 2017, 2018 and 2019 (combined) were in employment and 50% were employed in professional occupations
- * The OU's Employability of Qualifiers Survey (EQS) is a survey of OU leavers that takes place approximately 3.5 years after qualification. It is run to collect additional information that is not collected through the Graduate Outcomes (GO) survey, such as career change and career progression, and to get a picture of performance further out from time of qualification.

What difference will hopefully occur as a result? (Tangible change envisaged)

We hope that offering this service will improve career and personal development outcomes for disabled students. EmployAbility are offering a webinar on Mental Health which we are offering widely, not just to students who have disclosed to encourage students to disclose who might need to.

How will we know? (How the change is measured)

We will monitor the numbers of students that register to attend the webinar sessions offered. Some of these students may go on to receive follow up with 1-2-1 support from EmployAbility. We are working out how to collect feedback from these students and this will likely involve use of a short questionnaire.

Change will also need to be measured by looking at the longer-term impact of the programme though surveys such as Graduate Outcomes (GO) and the OU's EQS; students will be able to determine the effectiveness/impact if they meet their career goals (job/promotion/career change etc.)

Title of project/activity

Student Community & Computing Club (Lead: Janet Hughes)

What change is being made? (Brief description(s) of overall activity/intervention)

Discussions have been held with OUSA and computing students to begin an online student community and computing club.

Why are we making it? (Rationale for the change)

A previous computing club stalled when the student chair graduated. BCS student chapter as a way forward was discussed extensively in 20/21 but OUSA eventually advised that it would be better to begin a new student-led computing club, with support from staff. This initiative is particularly important for OUIS students who are geographically distant from any other BCS meetings and in a pandemic situation where meeting with fellow students (e.g. at tutorials or even exams) is prevented. A cybersecurity group for students is being established this year but it is primarily aimed at postgraduate level and is inappropriate for students of computing who seek a less narrow community.

What difference will hopefully occur as a result? (Tangible change envisaged)

We envisage this to develop into monthly student-led events that allow a community to develop across year groups, across nations and regions within nations. We hope this will encourage interactions and networking with under-represented groups (such as women in computing, BAME in computing).

How will we know? (How the change is measured)

We will measure the impact through analysis of frequency of meetings, participation from different nations, participation by students from different groups including under-represented groups and feedback comments.

Title of project/activity

Big Blether Series (Lead: Viki Soper)

What change is being made? (Brief description(s) of overall activity/intervention)

The concept of a 'blether' event, where students can get together in an informal environment to discuss issues of interest and concern was conceived by an OU Students Association (OUSA) student representative, who had run similar events successfully over Facebook. In November 2020, the Access, Participation and Success team, with input and collaboration from colleagues across the OUIS worked with our OUSA student reps to organise a 'Big Blether' event as part of Student Voice week.

Why are we making it? (Rationale for the change)

The success of this event, and the development and publication of our Student Mental Health Agreement, lead to a further series of 'blethers' with a focus on mental health and wellbeing to be hosted through 2021. The Big Blether series will bring OU in Scotland students together to create community, a sense of belonging and to combat loneliness. It also aims to address challenges associated with mental health, breaking down barriers and removing stigmas.

What difference will hopefully occur as a result? (Tangible change envisaged)

The aim of the blether series for 2021 is to engage students meaningfully in the development of healthy cultures and communities, promoting good mental health and wellbeing through the sharing of knowledge and expertise. One of the long-term aims of the project is to empower students to take these conversations forward and, as informed by evaluation and measurement metrics, could become a continuing series of events post 2021.

How will we know? (How the change is measured)

Evaluation for each event in the series is key to measure their success by gauging uptake and gathering feedback from students. After the spring Blether, we sent a survey to all attendees to gather feedback on the event. The questionnaire received 21 responses. Overall, 90% of respondents considered the session to have been helpful in some way. More than half of the respondents stated they liked the information they received through the presentation and discussion and its relevance to their lives and health. About 61% of the responses stated that they found the connection with fellow students, participation, and communication with staff to be very valuable to them. We also asked the survey participants what their 'most wanted' topics would be for future blethers in the series and this, along with the information gathered from this evaluation has been used to inform the planning and development of our Summer Blether, planned for June 2021.

Title of project/activity

Who are the Education Studies (Primary) Concurrent students?

What change is being made? (Brief description(s) of overall activity/intervention)

The Education Studies (Primary) programme (Q94) has seen an increase in the number of students studying 2 concurrent modules (120 credits) at all levels. The three core modules for Q94 (E103, E209 and E309) attract 49%, 59% and 60% concurrent students respectively (2020/2021 module data).

This is an external change, to which we are having to respond. Therefore, the activity of this scholarship project has been to better understand our concurrent students, how they demonstrate resilience in managing their study, the issues of studying concurrently within our systems and the opportunities that concurrent study brings. We have developed this understanding through:

- Surveying 1319 concurrent students on Q94 in 2020/21.
- Surveying 87 associate lecturers working on Q94 in 2020/21.
- Interviewing 25 concurrent students about their experiences
- Interviewing 12 associate lecturers about their experiences of concurrent students.
- Gathering data analytics about concurrent students, their study patterns and successes.

The project team consists of module chairs, staff tutors, associate lecturers and data analysts, providing a rich multi-perspective space in which to develop the methodology of the project and analyse the findings.

Why are we making it? (Rationale for the change)

Through anecdotal evidence, more formal types of feedback from associate lecturers and students, and from our own experiences as a project team, we were increasingly aware of:

A. the narratives that surrounded concurrent students, and their behaviours on modules (e.g. the narrative that concurrent students who struggle are automatically assumed to not be coping with the workload).

B. the resilience capabilities concurrent students develop to manage workload, contradictions between modules and their own learning approaches within OU systems (e.g. how they use assignment extensions to their advantage).

C. the need in some circumstances for resources or interventions to specifically help concurrent students (as evidenced in the need to create a shared module planner between two big modules which are often taken concurrently).

Therefore, in line with the WELS priority to "Deliver an even better student experience through targeted and personalised support to help our students achieve their goals", the project aims to;

- Understand the nature of/diversity within the cohort of Q94 concurrent students and their study patterns and outcomes,
- understand the person behind Q94 concurrent students' background and reasons for choosing to study 120 credits in each presentation,
- investigate the experience concurrent students have had during their study,
- analyse the retention and attainment of these students and explore the factors that impact upon them,
- explore the challenges they have encountered and how they have overcome them,
- generate guidance for qualification and module teams, ALs and SRSC/SST staff.

What difference will hopefully occur as a result? (Tangible change envisaged)

The main difference created from this project will be a better, richer, understanding of the diversity and needs of Concurrent Students in Q94. It will provide a series of student vignettes which will promote;

- the ways in which concurrent students demonstrate resilience in managing two modules, and
- different narratives, to dispel myths and create more accurate and diverse understandings of how concurrent students study effectively

Although the study is focusing on concurrent students in one specific qualification it is expected that the findings will be useful for other programmes of study with high numbers of concurrent students.

How will we know? (How the change is measured)

While these differences are largely focused on behavioural and attitudinal changes amongst staff and students, which is difficult to measure in the short term, there are some expected actions which will be indications of the impact of the project. These include:

- Improved Information, Advice and Guidance for concurrent students
- Greater evidence of University / Faculty / School / Programme level strategic planning of modules, content and pedagogical structures to value, and positively celebrate concurrent students.
- Evidence of Q94 module teams adapting content, resources and assessments to better support the concurrent experiences of many of our students.
- Q94 Associate lecturers having increased awareness, through attending AL professional development events, of the pedagogical needs of concurrent students.
- Evidence of student advisors and members of Student Support Teams having a broader understanding of the issues, challenges and positive opportunities of concurrent study in order to provide targeted advice and support.

As stated, the change from our project is likely to be longer term. This initial stage of the project was focused on gathering information on students. Future phases will focus more on establish a framework of actions which can be evaluated for impact.

Dissemination of work

How will you promote and communicate your work internally and externally?

Communication remains at the forefront of our approach to disseminating Theme work within OUiS and the sector. In Year 1 we focused on sharing the Enhancement Theme with colleagues within OUiS to ensure an awareness of Theme work and to invite interest from colleagues who wanted to be involved within Theme activities. The success of this approach has meant that we now have representatives from across the University involved in overseeing Theme activity, sharing best practice and allowing us to have comprehensive insight into work happening not just in Scotland, but across the four-nations, that supports the Theme.

In Year Two we intend to build on the success of our internal communication channels developed in Year One to continue to highlight our work to colleagues. We have put together an Enhancement Activity presentation and overview document which we have offered to all units within OUiS to promote Theme activity and will make use of existing structures and opportunities to ensure colleagues are kept up to date. We will also organise Theme-related events such as Fika sessions and presentations and ensure attendance at Theme-related external events. We are planning an 'Enhancement Theme Christmas Special' Fika for December and intend to carry these sessions through 2022, using them to promote and communicate our theme activity.

Our Enhancement Theme Institutional Group (ETIG) meets every two months, and this has proved to be a key channel for communicating Theme activity from members back to their respective teams. We have also used our APS Steering Group to share work with key stakeholders.

In December 2021, the Open University will be delivering a 2-day mental health and wellbeing conference focusing on inclusivity. The conference will support the objectives of the Student and Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and the holistic approach taken. This will also include an overview and of details of work taking place in this space across the university. It will provide an opportunity for staff and student representatives to come together to celebrate the work taking place to develop our understanding of and support our staff and students with their mental health and wellbeing. We intend to share the work we are doing to support the current Theme at this conference.

As Year 1 has been primarily focussed on planning of projects and initiatives, we have not shared much sector-wide however there is work to be done in Year 2 for us to proactively share outcomes and results as projects begin and we start to evaluate impact and effectiveness.

Supporting staff and student engagement

How will you support your community to engage with planned activities?

To ensure that the enhancement activity we are undertaking as an institution can be clearly linked to the Theme, our Enhancement Theme Institutional Group developed a narrative that highlights what 'resilient learning communities' means to us. This means that we can clearly link project initiatives to this definition to encourage staff to engage with the Theme. Our definition is below:

Resilience is the ability to positively adapt to change and challenging circumstances. At the Open University in Scotland we understand that everybody may have the need to develop resilience and adapt to challenges that they may face through their study journey with us. We consider learning communities to mean any group of students, Open University Student's Association members, alumni, support staff and teaching staff who are collaborating in any context. We are looking to support our students and staff, to provide them with tools to adapt when confronted with challenging circumstances and difficult conditions.

We have been considering the projects and initiatives that we are undertaking in relation to supporting our students to develop resilience and how we can facilitate resilient learning communities within our student body. Evaluation will be embedded into all projects from the start to ensure reporting on their impact will be comprehensive. We intend to deliver against the resilient learning communities' theme through:

- Projects that work to improve progression outcomes for learning communities (EmployAbility)
- Responding to demand to build community and social opportunities for learning communities (Student community and computing club, Big Blether)
- Providing opportunity for learning communities to overcome specific challenges (SiSE Open Learn resources, SIMD20 project, Forced Migration projects)
- Raising awareness within our staff community of the challenges our students may be facing to allow them to support resilience of their students (Sense of Belonging Toolkit)

The Access, Participation and Success team provides bi-monthly updates to the Senior Staff Group within the Open University in Scotland to ensure colleagues are aware of our enhancement activity.

Plan author:	
	Viki Soper

Date:	7 th September 2021
-------	--------------------------------

Return to: ARCadmin@qaa.ac.uk