



## End of Year 1 Report for: University of Aberdeen

### Institutional team

We have a stable and committed Institutional Team with consistent staff and student representation on the Theme Leaders Group. We are in the process of identifying further student representation for our Steering Group particularly at postgraduate level for year 2 and 3.

### Evaluation of activities/outcomes

#### Title of project/activity: Community of Practice (Evaluation 1)

Development of a Resilient Learning Communities Community of Practice spanning all areas of the University of Aberdeen.

1. What change **has been** made? (Brief description(s) of overall activity/intervention)

A Community of Practice group has been established with representation from all 12 Schools and professional service units of the University of Aberdeen (current membership ~35). This group discusses initiatives, shares practice and examines areas of work related to Resilient Learning Communities at meetings scheduled every 2 months.

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

Learning communities are fundamental to University life and work and take on many different forms. As such, work relating to these is concurrently taking place in many different areas. The Community of Practice has been designed and established to create a forum for discussing *any and all* work relating to the Enhancement Theme, sharing ideas and practice where appropriate and offering insight and support to further enhance the work. It also acts a 2-way communication stream and sounding board between central university administration and the academic and professional service units (including staff and students).

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

In the interesting and interactive meetings so far, there has been lots of collaborative discussion around elements ranging from our funded Learning and Teaching Enhancement Projects to addressing student uncertainty, project evaluation and a review of our pastoral provision. The openness of the forum has been effective in creating discussion around topics and establishing further collaborative conversations outside of the meetings. The range of staff and students involved creates an opportunity to harvest ideas and opinions from a variety of perspectives, which supports and informs the wider Theme work.

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

Change as a result of the Community of Practice will relate to collective enthusiasm for the Enhancement Theme and the augmented engagement it yields by bringing the Theme to a new, broader audience. However, this is challenging to measure.

Change will be evident in the breadth of topics covered by the Community of Practice, its impact on the other strands of theme work, and by identifying the extent of collaboration taking place across the University. Overall involvement with the Enhancement Theme, partly measured through engagement with the Annual Academic Symposium and the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Project funding call, will also provide a measure of impact. Yearly discussions with the Community of Practice over the course of the Theme will be used to harvest and record perceptions of the progress being made in the group and with the Enhancement Theme more broadly. We will then work with the evaluation guidance shared with the TLG to develop our own evaluation process that investigates the impact of the Community of Practice on member knowledge, changes in practice, collaborative exchanges, changes in policy, development of training to support staff, range of networks etc.

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

The Enhancement Theme Steering Group (which The Resilient Learning Communities Community of Practice feeds into)

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

One key aspect established already is the sense of collaboration and willingness for discussion across the Community of Practice. This is linked to bringing people together from across all elements of the University and creating collaborative discussions and consultations on key Theme related topics / issues. This is a new model for approaching the Enhancement Theme, and one that has already established a vibrant and enthusiastic community. Examples of some of the aspects discussed so far include:

- An upcoming review of our pastoral provision
- Input into central policy decisions around student support
- Collaboration and community between our Learning and Teaching Enhancement Projects

The Community of Practice has also shared examples of good practice relating to School-specific activities e.g. use of a Research Bites series to create a community amongst Postgraduate Research students and professional service initiatives e.g. involvement with Advance HE Collaborative Project: [Adding Value through Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Education in Higher Education](#).

7. Any things you **have stopped** doing? (Any unsuccessful elements)

Nothing to report here.

**Title of project/activity: Blended Learning (Evaluation 2)**

Provision of effective blended learning with a focus on transforming our approaches to teaching and learning post-pandemic.

1. What change **has been** made? (Brief description(s) of overall activity/intervention)

Using the *community of inquiry* model as the underpinning pedagogical framework, the University produced a set of [key principles](#) to guide and support the migration to blended learning during the pandemic. This has resulted in wholesale changes in our approaches to teaching and learning across the entire Institution throughout the pandemic. These changes have been facilitated by practice sharing, staff and student training, collaborative approaches and the creation of supportive toolboxes. As a result, the University was able to deliver effective teaching, learning and assessment across academic year 2020-21 despite the pressure of a global pandemic. Moving forward, we are keen to identify positive aspects of this transition that will persist and transform our practices after the pandemic.

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

The context of the COVID19 pandemic led to the need to deliver our education through blended learning (and fully online for students who could not get to campus). The University responded with

a unified, structured, student-focused approach to developing the delivery of our education. A set of Blended Learning Principles were developed collaboratively with staff and students. Alongside the Principles, a support package was put in place for each School including project management and School-based support from our Centre for Academic Development, and a Blended Learning Implementation Group with associated work streams that progressed key areas across the entire student experience. . An evaluation of our blended learning approach is ongoing and will report in July. The evaluation will enable us to identify good practice that will inform ongoing development of our education post-COVID as part of our overall Aberdeen 2040 Strategy developments.

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

The University successfully delivered a full academic year of blended and fully online courses and programmes. This has involved a variety of activities including pre-recorded lectures, small group face to face experiences (where permitted) (e.g. practical classes, tutorials), online tutorials and workshops, innovative use of the VLE and a move away from traditional exam assessments to in-course assessment. The provision of training through the Centre for Academic Development (CAD) and regular release of guidelines, innovations and the sharing of good practice through online fora provided a vital contribution to support staff in making these changes. As a result, our entire learning and teaching portfolio has evolved, with many of the changes proving very positive for the staff and students involved with evidence emerging through our evaluation. A strategic work stream will utilise the findings from our evaluation and evidence from the sector as part of an approach to developing our approach to the delivery of education at the University of Aberdeen.

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

An extensive evaluation of blended learning is in progress (since Dec 2020 using:

- Staff surveys (in progress)
- Staff focus groups (complete)
- Student surveys (in progress)
- Student focus groups (complete)

Clearly, this will capture a detailed picture of the effectiveness of blended learning through staff and student lenses. This ongoing assessment enables critical evaluation of changes made and use of Institutional evidence to inform further development and adjustment of our approaches moving forward. Indeed, some aspects of the surveys focus specifically on the changes that should be sustained beyond the pandemic, and thus serve as a basis for long term transformation of our approaches.

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

The blended learning evaluation is being carried out by the Dean for Educational Innovation, who will report to the Vice-Principal for Education and the University Education Committee.

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

Some of the key responses gathered from student focus groups indicate several aspects of blended learning as positive, including:

- flexibility in the learning provision
- pre-recorded learning materials
- shift away from traditional examinations to in course assessments that considered a broader range of skills
- provision of support at School and Institutional level
- greater time to engage with skill development activities

Other responses identified other areas that will require ongoing development to address include:

- sense of loneliness and isolation while learning remotely

- reduced exposure to practical skills and fieldwork

These responses indicate the value of this “real time” evaluation in establishing the positive elements of blended learning that should continue in our approaches and also areas for applying further development and consideration.

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

Some of the lessons learned within box 6 above have shaped our ongoing approaches and continue to be fed back to staff to develop their practice.

**Title of project/activity: Exploring the Potential of Micro-credentials and Digital Badges (Evaluation 3)**

During the first year of the QAA (Scotland) Enhancement Theme, Resilient Learning Communities, nine universities across the Scottish higher education sector and Jisc worked together, as a collaborative cluster on the project, *Exploring the Potential of Micro-credentials and Digital Badges*. The project aimed to explore stakeholder (academic, student, employer, and alumni) awareness and use of micro-credentials. The University of Aberdeen and Jisc co-led the research for the employer sub-group workstream.

The project comprised two components, a series of four stakeholder events (academics, employers, alumni, and students) and an associated survey for each stakeholder group. A key aspect of the employer research was to explore awareness and use of micro-credentials in the workplace, for example in recruitment, continuing professional development (CPD) and upskilling.

1. What change **has been** made? (Brief description(s) of overall activity/intervention)

At the start of the project, the lack of a clear, sector-wide definition for micro-credentials and its interchangeable use with the term ‘digital badges’ was causing confusion. To address this issue, the project team agreed and applied a working definition of micro-credentials across all stakeholder groups. In defining the term and using it coherently, the collaborative cluster project has made a major contribution in enabling all stakeholders to contribute meaningfully to the research project, whether they are familiar with ‘micro-credentials’ or not.

For the purpose of this project, the research team used the following micro-credential definition:

*Micro-credentials are small packets of learning and skills acquisition that may be recognised by a digital certificate or badge. They may be standalone, or the starting point for degree-level study.*

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

The modern workplace is becoming increasingly digital, with a growing reliance on technology and automation for administrative processes, communication and managing workstreams, often referred to as Industry 4.0. Our project is raising the profile and facilitating the adoption of micro-credentials. This is enabling employers to respond via access to more flexible education and lifelong learning, to facilitate upskilling of their workforce in this digital age.

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

The employer-facing sub-group has delivered a micro-credential employer consultation event and an associated survey. As a result, there is:

- Enhanced employer understanding about the value and potential of micro-credentials for employers from a range of employment sectors and organisational sizes.
- Interest expressed and awareness about the co-creation of micro-credentials by employers and universities.

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

Change will be achieved by measuring:

- Enhanced employer engagement with micro-credentials and universities.
- Employer co-creation of micro-credentials to meet specific business skills gaps.

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

Businesses, industry and the third sector working together in partnership with universities.

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

To reach the full potential for micro-credentials, the following lessons need to be applied:

- Agree a clear and universal micro-credential language across providers, to help alleviate employer confusion.
- Focus on the benefits and the value of micro-credentials for employers and employees, rather than the delivery aspects when marketing micro-credentials.

7. Any things you **have stopped** doing? (Any unsuccessful elements)

Assuming micro-credential and variant terminology such as nanodegree, MOOC, open badge and micro-degree are understood by employers.

## Dissemination of work

*Effective mechanisms for internal dissemination of outcomes and resources:*

- Our new **Community of Practice** (Evaluation 1) has proved to be a dynamic forum for sharing practice and exchanging ideas, including our successful Learning & Teaching Enhancement Programme (LTEP) projects. The Community of Practice membership (which includes students) is encouraged to share Theme activity with their School or University directorate.
- Enhancement Theme activities are also shared via our **existing networks** – the Learning & Teaching Network (LTN), the Pedagogical Inquiry Network (PIN) and the School Directors of Education.
- This year's **Annual Academic Development Symposium**, entitled 'Best of Blends: Building Resilient Learning Communities During Our University's Covid-19 Response', held in April 2021, was an opportunity to share institutional activity relating to the Theme through [Discussion Panels](#) and [posters](#). The [keynote](#) entitled 'Leading Enhancement in challenging times: creating outcomes of value' was provided by Professor Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal (Education), University of Aberdeen and Professor Clare Peddie, Vice-Principal Education (Proctor), University of St Andrews, Deputy Leader and Theme Leader respectively. Recordings, presentations and posters are available from the [Symposium website](#). Student representation was present in all six of the discussion panels at this year's Annual Academic Development Symposium.
- This year's **Learning & Teaching Enhancement Programme** (LTEP), launched in March 2021, aligns directly with the Theme. Promoting the opportunity and sharing information about the five projects which were successful in obtaining funding, has been a useful mechanism to enable discussions about the Theme through a variety of channels. Funded projects cover: widening participation, employability, developing student resilience, student mental health, particularly in relation to our Qatar campus, and accessibility in maths. Part of the application requirements was the involvement of students in the proposed projects to ensure the student perspectives were being fully captured as part of the work.
- We are in early stages of creating a **Toolbox of Practice and Resources** to support the development of resilient learning communities. This development forms part of a wider review of our Good Practice webpages, and the group examining this also has student representation
- All of the above examples reflect the *students as partners* approach to ensure student input to all of the relevant workstreams.

*Effective mechanisms for sharing outcomes and resources with the sector:*

- This year's **Annual Academic Development Symposium** was attended by external participants from across the sector including Glasgow, Heriot Watt, Robert Gordon, St Andrews Universities, Advance HE and the NHS.
- All the **web-based examples** included in this report are available to share with the sector.
- Our involvement with the **Micro-credentials and Digital Badges Collaborative Cluster** has also involved sharing our experiences across the sector.
- Staff and students from across the institution participated in the '**Building Resilient Learning Communities: Using Evidence to Support Student Success**' Conference in November 2020. Staff and students will be encouraged to participate in the next Enhancement Themes Conference.
- The **Toolbox of Practice and Resources** will be developed for internal use but will also be accessible by external institutions.
- The staff and student institutional leads have attended the **Theme Leaders Group meetings**, where common challenges and potential solutions to these have been widely shared and discussed with other attendees from across the sector. The details of these discussions and summaries of these meetings have then been widely shared internally to complete and reinforce the communication loop.

## Collaboration outwith your institution

- As mentioned above and in the third evaluation example, we are involved in the Collaborative Cluster **Micro-credentials and Digital Badges Collaborative Cluster** (led by Anne Tierney from Heriot-Watt University). Drs Joy Perkins and Mary Pryor, from the University of Aberdeen, with JISC, co-led the research for the employer sub-group workstream and contributed to a scoping event in March.
- There have been ongoing discussions within the Resilient Learning Communities Steering Group and across the Community of Practice about potential **future Collaborative Clusters** we might become involved with, and specific areas of **sector-wide work** that we may wish to contribute to.
- External guests were invited to attend our **Annual Academic Development Symposium** held in April 2021. Guests were invited to join with our own staff to attend parallel discussion panel sessions, each of which included staff and a student with expertise and experience relating to the topic (e.g. 'Social Presence and Blended Learning' and 'Learning together: Supporting an inclusive, accessible and diverse learning culture'). Guests were also invited and to view posters sharing examples of practice related to the Theme as a means of disseminating our work and encouraging discussion and collaboration.
- Our Vice-Principal Education is the deputy chair of the Advance HE / QAAS joint project on the Anti-Racist Curriculum. The learning from that group is informing the University's own work on Decolonising the Curriculum. An institutional steering group is now in place and has met once so far.

## Supporting staff and student engagement

Staff and students have been supported to engage in Theme activities in a number of ways:

- As in previous Themes, staff are supported to engage by applying for small amounts of funding through the **Learning & Teaching Enhancement Programme** to try something new in their teaching practice, or to evaluate or disseminate something which they have already doing. This year, staff were strongly encouraged to involve students in their proposal and [the five successful projects](#) all involve student internships.
- Student representation was present in all six of the discussion panels at this year's **Annual Academic Development Symposium**.

- Student representatives are evident in the Enhancement Theme Steering Group and also in The Community of Practice (Evaluation 1) to ensure that the student voice and existing staff and student partnership is captured across all work related to the Theme.
- Staff have been encouraged to engage with Theme activities through events as previously mentioned, but also through **existing networks** e.g. The Learning & Teaching Network and the Pedagogical Inquiry Network, which meet monthly.
- Staff will continue to be supported to engage with the Theme through the creation of a **Toolbox of Practice and Resources** which will provide a collection of online examples of resilient learning communities.

## Processes

- This year, for the first time, we have created a **Community of Practice** for the theme. As detailed in Evaluation 1, this has been a successful introduction to the Enhancement Themes to a broader group of staff representing all Schools and areas of Professional Services. The Community is working well as a new two-way structure to share information and practice relating to the Theme and is already acting as an agent for change at a more local level.
- The University's informal **Education Team** is led by the University's Vice-Principal Education and includes Education Deans, the Students' Union, and senior staff from Professional Services. It meets fortnightly and receives regular updates on Theme activities, acting as a conduit to other activities. In these meetings our overarching 20-year educational strategy (part of the Aberdeen 2040 [Strategy](#)) has been discussed and shaped. Enhancement is very much embedded at the core of the strategy and our learning from this Theme will inform practice as we move forward with that vision.
- This report will be circulated through the University's **new committee structure** which includes the University's Education Committee and three sub-committees (Quality Assurance, Employability and Entrepreneurship, and Student Support) for information and discussion, and to inform plans for the remaining two years of the Theme.

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