



End of Year 1 Report for: Robert Gordon University

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.

Following submission of the institutional plan, nominations were invited to grow the membership of the RGU Enhancement Theme Leadership Group (RGU:ETLG). Membership of this cross-institutional group now comprises:

Emmanuel Akerele	President of Education and Welfare
Filippo Antoniazzi	Director of Student Life
Laura Binnie	Head of School, School of Health Sciences
Duncan Cockburn	Director of Planning and Policy Development
Elizabeth Gammie	Head of School, Aberdeen Business School
David McClean	Head of School, Scott Sutherland School of Architecture and Built Environment
Rachel McGregor	Academic Support Lead, DELTA
Fiona Roberts	Lead Teaching Excellence Fellow/Academic Strategic Lead, School of Health Sciences
Julie Strachan	Acting Head of DELTA

Members of the various project teams for the work strands reported below were also recruited to include representation from academic areas, relevant support services and students.

The TLG staff and student members remain unchanged. A new student member will be recruited in 2021/22, however, in light of changing student presidents.

Evaluation

Title of project/activity

Digital Learning Programme – Evolving RGU's Approach to Online Learning

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

This programme forms the first phase of a multi-year initiative to develop our institutional approaches to online learning. This initial phase focuses on engaging our university community and creating opportunities for reflection, practice sharing and user consultation to feed into four areas of work:

- a) Digital learning practice – updating the RGU Online Learning Baseline, our minimum expectation for online learning to reflect the increasing expectations of students across different modes of engagement (on-campus, blended learning, wholly online and short courses).
- b) Digital learning environment – conducting a review and developing a plan for enhancing our Moodle-based VLE.
- c) Digital Assessment – further development of sustainable procedures for remote examinations, by building on our experience during the pandemic and trialling online proctoring for remote examinations.
- d) Learning Analytics for evidence-based decision making – exploring the potential of data generated within our VLE to gain better insight into the student online learning experience.

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

The rapid innovation necessitated by COVID has led to many positive enhancements and accelerated progress in respect of the university's aspirations with regards to borderless learning. To fully capitalise on this, it is essential for the university to take stock of these developments and consider the future direction for online learning at RGU. The specific rationale for each individual area of work is as follows:

- a) Digital Learning Practice – RGU's current baseline standard for online learning does not fully reflect the anticipated change in our learning and teaching that will be required as we emerge from the pandemic nor the expansion in new kinds of students, such as Graduate Apprentices and short course learners. The new baseline will be used to encourage an engaging, equitable and cohesive online learning experience for all our learners, taking advantage of the new technologies rolled out during the pandemic.
- b) Digital Learning Environment - RGU's VLE and learning technologies are now central to learning, teaching, assessment, and student support. Its ongoing development is therefore vital to reflect the increasing expectations of our students and staff and retain our reputation as a leading provider of innovative and professionally-focused education.
- c) Digital Assessment – while RGU has delivered over 700 online alternative assessments during the past year, we have not been able to fully replicate traditional invigilation. This project will trial and make recommendations for the adoption of online proctoring in courses where there is a continuing need for timed examinations.
- d) Learning Analytics - the current capability of learning analytics within our VLE is limited and meaningful analysis of user generated data to enhance the online learning experience is not possible at scale. As learning has moved increasingly online it is necessary to gain better insight into the student experience through analysis of the available data, identify appropriate indicators of quality, and make these insights available to decision makers.

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

Overall, we hope that a significant outcome will be the influence of the staff and student voice in shaping the future direction of the digital learning experience at an institutional level.

Year 1 has been used to explore and scope change to be implemented within later stages of the Enhancement Theme. Each specific area of work is intended to realise specific changes as follows:

- a) Digital Learning Practice – a supported rollout of the updated RGU Online Learning Baseline will support our academic staff meet or exceed the new minimum expectation. Minimum standards will also be developed for new modes of engagement including hybrid learning, Graduate Apprenticeships and online short courses, leading to more consistent and high-quality experiences for these students.
- b) Digital Learning Environment – a roadmap and set of requirements, developed through stakeholder feedback and objective analysis, will inform the further development of our VLE. Proposals for internal funding to support development over the next period have also been submitted.
- c) Digital Assessment – more sustainable mechanisms of supporting alternative assessments will be established, including appropriate procedures for maintaining the integrity of online examinations.
- d) Learning Analytics – it is envisaged that we will have a better understanding of our students' digital learning experience and the interventions that can be made to further enhance quality.

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

- a) Digital Learning Practice – implementation of the updated RGU Online Learning Baseline will be assessed using a combination of quantitative measures in the uptake and usage of technology, and qualitative feedback through a variety of mechanisms such as student questionnaires, interviews and focus groups, with data gathered in Year 1 providing a baseline measure.
- b) Digital Learning Environment – future impact will be assessed by measuring implementation against the development roadmap established in Year 1.
- c) Digital Assessment – in the online proctoring pilot, evaluation will be conducted through interviews with students post-exam, as well as with the academic staff involved, to inform and refine future procedures.
- d) Learning Analytics – the initial phase of exploratory work will be evaluated through discussion and approval of implementation plans by our Digital Learning Steering Group.

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

This programme of work is being overseen by an institutional Digital Learning Steering Group, composed of a group of senior academic and professional staff, and student representatives. The project team will also report to our Teaching, Learning and Assessment Sub-committee.

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

N/A

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

N/A

Title of project/activity

Supporting whole-person education throughout the learner journey

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

The aim of this project is to further embed integrated support for whole-person learning throughout the student journey at RGU, with an emphasis on enhancing support at key moments of transition, promoting student wellbeing and resilience, and strengthening communication and awareness of available support.

In Phase 1, a key focus has been identifying, bringing together and adding further impetus to a range of related enhancement activities being undertaken across the university, including the:

- Student Partnership Objective, focusing on students' physical, mental and social health;
- Student-Facing Support Services Review, focusing on the university's information and support platform, Ask RGU;
- Teaching Excellence Fellow projects, focusing on embedding specific dimensions of the RGU Learning and Teaching Framework (RGU LTF).

This has involved:

- Mapping the aims and objectives of interlinked institutional activities;
- Ensuring effective liaison across project teams;
- Working collaboratively to facilitate student voice opportunities of cross-relevance.

In Phase 2, project teams will work together to define a suite of complementary deliverables informed by insights generated via the student voice sessions.

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

The key drivers for this project are:

- The introduction of the RGU LTF, which puts whole-person learning at the centre of the university's educational ethos;
- The additional focus that the pandemic has driven on the need for holistic student support which acknowledges the academic, personal and social aspects of learning;
- Student feedback highlighting scope to further support learners' academic preparedness, confidence, wellbeing and sense of learning community.

Given the currency of these drivers, there has been a high level of institutional interest in these issues hence the requirement in Phase 1 to work collaboratively across numerous projects to ensure alignment and maximize future impact.

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

By working in partnership, project leads within RGU and RGU:Union have initiated a series of student voice opportunities with a view to generating insights that will help to guide all related projects moving forwards. These have gathered student feedback on issues of relevance across projects, including students' views and experiences of

- Physical, mental and social health;
- Blended and online learning;
- Accessing support and communication platforms.

A student intern has been recruited enabled by Theme funding to support data gathering and analysis.

The immediate impacts of work in Phase 1 include:

- Enhanced cross-institutional collaboration and efficiencies;
- Enhanced partnership-working across staff and students;
- Students feeling their views are valued and heard;
- New insights into students' learning experiences.

It is envisaged that the longer-term impacts from phase 2 will include:

- Enhanced student-facing support information and communication platforms;
- Strengthened support for student transitions into and through university;
- Increased preparedness, confidence, wellbeing and resilience among students;
- Greater embedding of the RGU LTF.

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

The success of Phase 1 will be measured through the definition of a series of complementary project deliverables, informed by insights from student feedback.

In Phase 2, the impact of deliverables will be measured via a variety of mechanisms relevant to the project in question including:

- Student and staff engagement with deliverables;
- Student and staff feedback on deliverables;
- Student satisfaction, retention and success.

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

A variety of governance structures are in place for the projects connected with this strand, involving a range of academics, professional support colleagues and students. While decision-making for each project rests with the project team, decisions regarding areas of mutual interest have been made collaboratively by project leads.

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

It is often the case that the initial stages of enhancement activity must focus on generating buy-in and traction. However, one of the impacts of the pandemic has been that certain key issues, such as student wellbeing, resilience and support, are at the forefront of our entire learning community's minds. At the same time, both colleagues and students continue to deal with the challenges presented by COVID. In this context, the main requirement has been for effective liaison and collaboration to ensure emergent activities are aligned to maximize impact and avoiding adding further pressure onto students and staff.

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

N/A

Title of project/activity
Promoting retention and success through inclusive practice
1. What change has been/is being made? (Brief description(s) of overall activity/intervention)
<p>The aim of this strand of activity is to further promote inclusive curriculum design and delivery at the university in order to enhance student retention and success by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing staff awareness of, and skills in inclusive curriculum design and delivery, including the accessibility of digital learning in accordance with Public Sector Bodies Accessibility Regulations. • Interrogating institutional data and working in partnership with students and staff to identify further opportunities for impactful enhancement; • Planning and implementing targeted enhancements to promote parity of participation in priority areas. <p>Over the course of Year 1, the following activities have been undertaken:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery of an institutional project to enhance the accessibility of online learning at RGU by implementing guidance and technology to better support the creation of more accessible learning experiences; • Identification of a further project, Male Students: Closing the gap, through analysis of institutional data, and initial exploration into the male experience at RGU.
2. Why have we made/are we making it? (Rationale for the change)
<p>The rationales for the projects within this strand are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessibility of online learning – accessibility is a vital component of online education and recent changes in legislation also make explicit the expectation for digital accessibility within higher education. • Male students: Closing the gap – institutional equalities data highlight that male students perform less well than their female counterparts against a range of measures, including satisfaction, retention and achievement. Addressing these differences has been identified as a priority equality outcome for the university.
3. What difference has occurred/will hopefully occur as a result? (Tangible change made successfully or envisaged)
<p>The Accessibility of online learning project has articulated RGU's approach to digital accessibility, raised staff awareness of accessibility legislation requirements, developed staff skills, and delivered technology improvements through the:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of an accessibility statement for CampusMoodle, RGU's VLE • Creation of institutional guidance for implementing digital accessibility in online learning • Delivery of staff training in developing accessible online content

- Formation of a network of digital accessibility champions
- Support for academic Schools to define future training and enhancement plans
- Development of new guidance for students on utilising accessibility features
- Coordination of a pilot to evaluate options for video captioning

Some of the wider impacts anticipated from these changes include:

- More accessible and inclusive learning experiences for students
- Enhanced student satisfaction, retention and success
- Improved outcomes for students with disclosed disabilities

Male students: Closing the gap is currently in the 'discovery' phase of the project. Changes arising from initial project work include:

- Enabling of staff and student dialogue around the male student experience through the formation of a cross-institutional working group;
- Generation of new insights into male experiences and outcomes at the university through collation of data and insights from different areas.

Findings from the discovery phase will shape the definition and delivery of actions aiming at addressing gaps in male outcomes in session 2021/22. Looking ahead, anticipated impacts include:

- Improved satisfaction, retention and success for male students;
- Greater understanding and awareness of the male student experience among staff.

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

The change effected by these projects will be measured via:

- Student and staff feedback;
- Institutional equalities data.

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

Both projects are managed by cross-institutional working groups comprising representatives from relevant areas.

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

Matters of equality, diversity and inclusion have been foregrounded due to the pandemic, and these projects have benefitted from colleagues' increased awareness of, and eagerness to engage in these issues.

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

N/A

Title of project/activity
Supporting RGU's Course Leader Community
1. What change is being made? (Brief description(s) of overall activity/intervention)
<p>This project aims to scope and facilitate opportunities for Course Leaders to come together as a community to enrich colleagues' work in this pivotal role, support their professional development and enhance the overall student experience.</p> <p>The first phase of this project seeks to engage with RGU Course Leaders and other stakeholders to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine the key skills and attributes of Course/Programme Leaders aligned to the role responsibilities; • Identify and prioritise support and development needs for Course/Programme Leaders. <p>Following analysis of the data gathered in Phase 1, new support and development opportunities and/or resources will be developed and implemented in Phase 2 of the project.</p>
2. Why are we making it? (Rationale for the change)
<p>RGU recognises the crucial contribution of our Course Leaders regarding the student learning experience, as borne out by student feedback via mechanisms such as the NSS. This acknowledgement led to the re-specification and incentivisation of the role in 2018. Building on this change, and the university's engagement with the Collaborative Cluster on Programme Leadership as part of the previous Theme, this project seeks to enhance the support and development available to Course/Programme Leaders to assist them in discharging their pivotal role and to further promote their confidence and resilience.</p>
8. What difference has/will hopefully occur as a result? (Tangible change made successfully or envisaged)
<p>The following activities have already been completed as part of this project:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A working group has been formed, comprising Course/Programme Leaders from across RGU's academic Schools, as well as representatives from HR and DELTA. • Five focus groups have been run to gather feedback from an institutional cross-section of Course/Programme Leaders in support of Phase 1 objectives. <p>Initial feedback from these activities suggests that they have already begun to positively impact the Course/Programme Leader experience, with colleagues appreciating the:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • opportunity for dialogue with Course/Programme Leaders in other disciplines; • chance to give voice to Course/Programme Leaders' experiences and needs; • confirmation that professional counterparts share similar issues, challenges and concerns. <p>In Phase 2 of the project, data gathered via these focus groups and sessions with other key stakeholders will inform the development of new support and CPD opportunities for RGU Course/Programme Leaders. The following longer-term impacts are envisaged:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course/Programme Leaders' professional confidence and effectiveness are increased; • Course/Programme Leaders' wellbeing, resilience and job satisfaction are promoted; • Further practice sharing and professional dialogue among Course/Programme Leaders' are facilitated; • Students' course experiences are enhanced leading to increased retention, satisfaction and success.

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

The change effected by this project will be measured via the following means:

Short-term impact

- Feedback from Course/Programme Leaders;
- Engagement with new support/development opportunities.

Longer-term impact

- Evidence from Course/Programme Leader application and review processes;
- Student outcomes.

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

This project is being overseen by the cross-institutional working group described under question 3. The working group reports to the RGU:ETLG.

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

The positive feedback arising from early project activities has confirmed the appropriacy of the project focus and also the value of the collaborative approach involving Course/Programme Leaders as key stakeholders.

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

N/A

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.

The following mechanisms have helped to support effective dissemination within RGU during Year 1, as envisaged in our institutional plan:

- RGU:ETLG members and project leads acting as champions for the Theme
- Raising awareness via the university's Committee structure
- Staff development and networking opportunities, for example, the RGU Learning and Teaching Conference.

A new approach was also devised in spring 2022 in response to the range of enhancement activity that was launching under the auspices of various initiatives at the university and concerns over the potential for "enhancement fatigue" among staff and students at this challenging time.

Recognising that these projects all shared the common aim of charting RGU's future direction post-COVID, the decision was taken to unite them under the single banner of the Emerging Stronger campaign. This has helped to support effective dissemination across all initiatives by providing a single, timely "brand" for staff and students to engage with. As reported below, the introduction of the Emerging Stronger Enhancement Award fund and development programme has further helped to raise awareness of the Theme and connected initiatives, as well as supporting coherence and shared learning across projects.

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.

As predicted in RGU's institutional plan for Year 1, engagement with collaborative clusters has been a key mechanism for collaboration with other institutions this year.

RGU has worked in partnership with a number of other universities on the 'Exploring the potential of Micro-credentials and digital badging' cluster, including co-hosting an event in April 2021 to gather the "customer" perspective on such qualifications.

The university has also been actively involved in the 'Programme leadership: Strengthening Resilience, Supporting Learning Communities' cluster and was invited to present an institutional perspective on the recognition and reward of Programme Leaders at an event in February. RGU Course Leaders have benefitted from being engaged in cross-institutional action learning sets facilitated by this cluster.

As illustrated by this example, the foci of collaborative clusters and RGU's projects in Year 1 have closely complemented one another, meaning that participation has been helpful in informing institutional activity. For example, colleagues involved in the RGU strand 'Promoting retention and success through inclusive practice' have benefitted from engaging with cluster activities on 'Decolonising the curriculum in the time of pandemic' and 'Student mental wellbeing within our BAME and LGBTQ+ communities'.

In addition to the collaborative clusters, participation in the Theme Leadership Group has provided useful opportunities to share practice and insights with other institutions, which have then influenced the operation of the Theme at RGU.

Supporting staff and student engagement

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

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

- The RGU:ETLG has been constituted comprising cross-institutional representation from academic schools, support services and RGU:Union;
- Project teams have been recruited including staff and students from across the university;
- Two student internships have been created to support institutional activities enabled by Theme funding;
- As reported above, staff and student consultation has been a core feature of many Year 1 activities, including a range of focus groups connected to project strands;
- Theme funds have been utilised to sponsor the Emerging Stronger Enhancement Award scheme, enabling staff and students to bid for funding to take forward a project of their choosing, with six awards made in June 2021;

- Further engagement has been generated via staff development events taking place as part of the Emerging Stronger Campaign.

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?

Key points of learning stemming from the processes, approaches and structures we are using to support this Theme include the value of:

- involving multiple voices and perspectives in project management and delivery;
- planning time for 'discovery' at the outset of projects and stakeholder engagement;
- maintaining flexibility to accommodate the dynamic nature of enhancement and fluidity created by the pandemic;
- sharing learning and resources across projects and institutional areas;
- having the confidence to commit to longer-term initiatives as well as short-term projects.

This report will be shared with the RGU:ETLG and project leads to inform planning for Year 2. It will also be shared with the wider university via the RGU committee structure.

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