



## Student Transitions Enhancement Theme: End of Year 3/End of Theme Synopsis

The key purposes of this report are to:-

- provide a framework for HEIs to report on their Year 3 activity
- help share information across the sector on the benefits and challenges around Theme engagement.

<b>Institution</b>
University of Aberdeen
<b>Theme Leaders' Group institutional representative(s)</b>
Professor Kath Shennan
<b>Institutional team membership</b>
<p>Dr Tim Baker (Senior lecturer, English &amp; Film Studies &amp; Chair of the Student Engagement and Managing Expectations Taskforce)</p> <p>Dr Martin Barker (Senior Lecturer (Scholarship), Biological Sciences)</p> <p>Liam Fuller (Student President for Education &amp; Employability)</p> <p>Dr Peter Henderson (Senior Lecturer (Scholarship), Chemistry)</p> <p>Professor Hazel Hutchison (Dean for Undergraduate Studies, Arts and Social Sciences)</p> <p>Professor Chris Kee (Dean for Postgraduate Studies, Arts and Social Sciences)</p> <p>Professor Peter McGeorge (Vice Principal, Teaching &amp; Learning)</p> <p>Professor Judith Masthoff (Dean of the Graduate School)</p> <p>Professor Alison Jenkinson (Dean for Undergraduate Studies, Science and Engineering)</p> <p>Professor David McCausland (Economics)</p> <p>Dr Sally Middleton (HE Progression routes Coordinator, Student Recruitment &amp; Admissions)</p> <p>Professor Ekaterina Pavlovskaja (Dean for Postgraduate Studies, Science and Engineering)</p> <p>Dr Joy Perkins (Educational &amp; Employability Advisor, Careers Service &amp; Centre for Academic Development)</p> <p>Dr Bruce Scharlau (Senior Lecturer (Scholarship), Computing &amp; Chair of the Positive Outcomes taskforce)</p> <p>Professor Kath Shennan (Dean for Quality Enhancement &amp; Assurance)</p> <p>Chris Sojka (Widening Participation Officer, Student Recruitment and Admissions)</p> <p>Patricia Spence (Centre Manager, Centre for Academic Development)</p> <p>Tracey Stewart (Deputy Head of Admissions)</p> <p>Dr Steve Tucker (Senior Lecturer (Scholarship), School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition &amp; Chair of the Student Retention taskforce)</p>
<b>Outline what was achieved in relation to your Year 3 plan of work, at the time of submitting this report.</b>

**Identify what future outcomes are anticipated to be delivered by the end of the Theme.  
Have there been any unintended outcomes/unexpected findings?**

## **Achievements in Relation to Year 3 Plan of Work**

### **1. Learning & Teaching Enhancement Programme (LTEP)**

In spring 2017 a sub-group of the Institutional Steering Group agreed to allocate funding to eight of the sixteen proposals which were submitted.

- **Summer School for Engineering Articulating Students:** funding provided to encourage engagement by providing lunch and subsidised travel
- **Student Transitions - the role of student support structures:** this is a research project the focus of which is to understand the factors that support student success and satisfaction, specifically the role of formal support structures in meeting student needs and helping them manage academic and social transitions. The study will also look at how tutor and peer systems are used by students.
- **Supporting Students with Autism Transition out of University:** led by the Aberdeen University Student Association (AUSA) with the Careers Service, academic Schools and the National Autism Society, this is a project to support students with autism to obtain graduate level jobs.
- **Survival Guide:** also led by AUSA, the outcome of this project will be the production of a handbook, created by students who have entered university from college, with input from staff in key support services, to improve support for, and retention of, articulating students.
- **Online Professional Skills Course:** this is a Careers Service project which will evaluate, further develop, and disseminate information about the suite of professional skills course which they provide.
- **A Comparative Study of Blended and Online Learning Virtual Optical Pedagogy:** the project aims to inform and enhance existing pedagogy around the use of virtual optical microscopy by capturing students' perceptions and usage patterns of a virtual microscope in blended and online situations.
- **Telling Tales - using student narratives to aid transition:** the outcome of this project will be a series of short documents and videos which provide Aberdeen-specific advice about academic and personal concerns developed from information collected from students.
- **Contemplating Transition Metals:** this project aims to support first year chemistry student transitions using contemplative inquiry into the metaphor of transition metals.

### **2. Events**

#### **Annual Learning & Teaching Network Event, 16 November 2016**

The Annual Learning & Teaching Network Event 2016 had the theme 'Student Engagement: Fresh Thinking, Fresh Approaches'. Dr Debbi Marais, Principal Teaching Fellow at the University of Warwick, explored the topic of "Engaging the Disengaged Student". The session reviewed engagement activities linked to transitions across the student lifecycle, starting with the admission process and continuing to graduation, meeting physiological, psychological and self-fulfilment needs. This was followed by parallel sessions hosted by the University's Strategic Feedback & Assessment Task Force Group, topics included: Flipping the Classroom, Innovative Assessment and Formative Feedback. Fifty staff from across the institution attended the event.

### **Annual Academic Development Symposium, 27 April 2017**

This year's theme was 'Student Transitions: Moving On, Moving Up' to align with the Enhancement Theme. The event was attended by nearly 80 members of staff, including visitors from North East Scotland College and the Robert Gordon University. Participants heard from a tripartite key note delivering views from student, staff and employer perspectives, and also took part in 'swap shop' workshops. The event ended with a debate which had the motion 'This house believes that 'employability' has no place in the curricula of a research-intensive university'.

### **Maths & Specific Learning Differences Symposium, 9 June 2017**

This Symposium is designed for maths, Specific Learning Difference Advisers, and disability advisers/tutors from HEIs across Scotland. The key note address will be from Emma Cliffe, the Mathematics and Statistics Resource Centre Development Officer and Maths Study Skills Adviser for students with Specific Learning Differences, at the University of Bath.

### **Attendance at Student Transitions Events**

Five members of the University of Aberdeen's Institutional Steering Group attended the Student Transitions Institutional Teams meeting on 30 November 2016.

Sixteen members of staff and four students will contribute to this year's International Enhancement in Higher Education Conference in Glasgow.

## **3. Collaboration**

### **Commuting students (Transition THROUGH)**

Meetings have been held between University of Aberdeen, Robert Gordon University (RGU), University of the Highlands and Islands and the University of the West of Scotland on the issues facing commuting students with each institution sharing their experience and data. This collaboration may continue in the future with a likely shift in focus to ways to encourage and measure engagement of this group of students, and whether this is linked to an increased likelihood of retaining students.

### **Professional Skills (Transition OUT)**

The University of Aberdeen, University of Dundee and Abertay University have been collaborating on a short-term, Enhancement Theme funded project to investigate current practice in the use of Open Badges to recognise and reward skills development, both in the co-curriculum and curriculum. As part of the project a dissemination event, 'Open Badges – What, Why and How?' will be hosted at the University of Dundee on the 19th June. The event will also provide an opportunity for the inter-institutional project team to share their desktop 'Open Badge' research findings with the wider HE sector. The research is being supported by two student interns based at the Universities of Aberdeen and Dundee.

The inter-institutional badge project aims are to:

- Summarise and evaluate current badge practice within the curriculum and co-curriculum across the UK HE sector.
- Provide clear and coherent information on the 'what, why and how?' of Open Badges in higher education through the production of a Quick Reference Open Badge Guide.

- Report on the current and potential use of Open Badges to enhance effective transition tailored to specific audiences e.g. students, academics and employers.

The project builds upon initial work conducted to investigate employers' understanding of Open Badges at the University of Aberdeen's Careers Service Employer Board in January 2017. At the meeting members of the Board were invited to take part in small group discussions to consider the main challenges and benefits of adopting Open Badges in Higher Education and how employers envisage utilising Open Badges in their recruitment and selection process. The Board was positive about the concept of Open Badges, and encouraged the University to progress this initiative as an early adopter within the sector. It was clear from the meeting that Open Badges have considerable potential to support a variety of student transitions and to evidence students' achievement of professional/academic skills and graduate attributes developed through both their formal and informal learning.

#### **Collaborations with Schools and Colleges (Transition IN)**

The HE Progression Routes Coordinator attended all North East Scotland Colleges Open Days this year to promote University entrance from HN qualifications from the very start of the student's College journey. Academic staff have also met with students at Colleges across Scotland and arrangements have been made to continue to visit HNC/HND cohorts throughout their time at College. The University held its first Articulation Day on Tuesday 22nd November 2016 where 130 HNC and HND students from four Further Education Colleges visited the University campus for a range of general and discipline-specific activities. A particularly successful part of the day, and a departure from traditional talk formats, saw all students offered a networking lunch where they had the chance to meet staff and students, including students who had previously come into the University through articulation routes.

The Partnerships Group, formed between Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeenshire Council, North East Scotland College, RGU, University of Aberdeen and School Parent Groups, is now established and is working on analysing data for transitions from School to Further and Higher Education. An additional discussion point is how to support pupils better, especially those with additional needs.

#### **4. Project Groups**

##### **Widening Participation and Induction Activities (Transition IN)**

Best practice around induction was shared from across the Institution and collated into a brief covering pre-arrival, arrival and post-arrival induction approaches which has been shared broadly amongst Schools. One of the primary recommendations has been a more cohesive and joined-up approach to induction and the Group helped pull together events that were previously run independently by different University sections into a more consistent, unified approach. The group has also been involved in the planning and development of the New Student Orientation event, which will take place over two days (Monday and Tuesday of Freshers' Week) in a conference style. Students will be able to sign up online for the sessions that are most relevant to them. Sessions are chosen from an array of different options ranging from 'Studying in Scotland' to 'Opening a Bank Account'. This will run for all incoming students for the first time in Sept 2017 having previously been run exclusively for international students.

Schools and disciplines were encouraged to adopt social media as a tool to facilitate early engagement with around 90% of Schools offering such approaches in AY 2016-17. The central social media team, as well as those who have developed social media approaches within component Schools, have circulated 'how to guides' and also advice sheets on the set-up and maintenance of

these groups. Furthermore, the use of virtual open days, Facebook Live and Periscope approaches have enhanced the level and extent of pre-arrival engagement significantly.

### **Student Engagement and Managing Expectations (Transition IN and THROUGH)**

The Feedback and Assessment Task Force has continued to work with students on the production of short videos for the website that will, in part, introduce them to academic aspects of university life, explaining issues such as forms of assessment and feedback, timelines for submission and our expectations of first-year work, use of the Virtual Learning Environment, plagiarism, and student opportunities to provide feedback on their courses. However, in the immediate term the Task Force has worked on developing in-person induction activities, to be held the Wednesday of Freshers' Week; all Schools have been asked to develop induction programmes that include not only course content-specific material, as has been done in the past, but more general principles of feedback and assessment. These sessions will also be recorded and placed on MyAberdeen for students unable to attend. In addition an 'Assignments and Assessments Skills Exchange' is planned for mid-June to exchange good practice from across the Institution.

### **Work-related Learning (Transition OUT)**

The University-wide Work-related Learning course was approved through the University's Quality Assurance processes and has been 'softly' promoted in three disciplines. To date five students from the School of Biological Sciences, thirty students from the School of Psychology and one student from the School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition have expressed an interest in taking the course and are completing the proposal form. The course will be assessed through two separate assessments; the initial proposal form, which includes a skills audit, plus a final reflective report on their experience which includes an updated skills audit. Rubrics are being developed for marking the assessments to ensure consistency across the Institution, and for the pilot phase a single external examiner will be used.

A student booklet entitled 'Online Professionalism and Employability: A guide on how to use social media to become more employable' has been developed and is available as a downloadable pdf at <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/careers/resources/documents/5665.pdf>. In addition our institutional Enhancement Theme funding enabled the publication of 1000 hard copies of the booklet which is available to students through the Careers Service.

## **5. Multimedia Resource**

Our student-facing multimedia resource celebrates the end of the Theme by animating the student journey through the various stages of transition. The resource itself has been entirely created by a fourth year student with input from members of the Institutional Theme Steering Group at various stages. It will be available from our Enhancement Theme webpages after the International Conference.

## **Future Outcomes**

Some of the projects funded through the 2016-17 Learning & Teaching Enhancement Programme outlined above will provide outputs towards the end of the Theme and will be in use beyond the end of the Theme. For example, the Summer School for articulating Engineering students may become an ongoing initiative and be broadened out to more disciplines; the 'survival guide' for articulating students will be made available to future incoming articulating students; the 'folk narratives' resource for students which will provide peer-based advice for various transition points

in the journey through University will be made available online on the 'New Students' website, the AUSA website and/or the University's VLE as appropriate.

A meeting to reflect on the Theme (both content and process), exchange examples of practice and to explore future ideas will be held after the International Conference. It will involve all those who attend the Conference and the members of the Institutional Theme Steering Group.

### **Unintended Outcomes/Unexpected Findings**

Advancements in social media and our engagement with these, for example, Facebook Live, Periscope and Virtual Open Days, is revolutionising the University's induction activities by giving students a much better appreciation of the University even before arrival. Although previously intended for international students, the student response to induction activities for this cohort proved so positive that the sessions are now available to all students.

The purpose of one of the previous LTEP projects was to research online professionalism and employability. Because of the level of interest expressed in this idea a booklet (as mentioned above) was published in hard copy and distributed to students via the Careers Service.

As previously mentioned, an early internal idea to explore the use of open badges become a collaborative project after enthusiasm to progress their use was expressed by the Careers Service Employer Board.

### **In what ways have institutional team members (including students) engaged in Theme activities during this session?**

**It would be helpful to reflect on the following aspects: developing the institution's plan of work, contributions to institutional team meetings, participation in the Theme Student Network and TLG meetings, participation in the International Enhancement Conference, participation in the institutional team event held in November 2016, institutional work undertaken as part of the year 3 plan etc.**

The Institutional Steering Group includes representatives from across the Institution including both academic and professional services staff. Sub-groups of the Steering Group contributed to Institutional plans and end of year reports, identification of case studies and the selection of projects to be awarded funding through LTEP. Several members of the Steering Group attended the Institutional Team event in November 2016.

Some Institutional team members were also leaders of project groups that had Theme-related remits which led to both outward (from Institutional team to project group and further to individual disciplines) and inward dissemination of ideas and proposed practice.

Although we have had limited student engagement in the Student Network we have had good engagement with students in the Institutional Steering Group and Theme activities, for example, three out of five case studies in Year 2 of the Theme were student-led and written by students, three out of five Year 3 multimedia presentations were entirely led by students with the remainder having some student involvement in terms of authoring and evaluating. When piloting the use of social media as a pre-engagement tool, student ambassadors and members of staff have been excellent and fully engaged. This level of engagement made it easy to encourage other Schools to adopt this approach.

The final multimedia presentation has been devised by a final year student based partly on his own experience of the University supplemented with additional new initiatives that arose during the Theme.

**Identify good practice in supporting the TLG representative/alternate both in their TLG role and in their institution.**

The role of the TLG Representative at the University of Aberdeen has changed during the life of this Theme to include Quality Enhancement as an official part of her role. This allows protected time to be set aside for Theme-related activities.

**Which mechanisms has your institution employed to disseminate outcomes and resources internally, and to the sector?**

**Which approaches have been most effective?**

**Illustrative examples would be valuable.**

The University runs at least two symposia a year at which good practice is shared. The Annual Academic Development Symposium was held on 27<sup>th</sup> April 2017 (<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/annual-academic-development-symposium-3219.php>) and the Annual Learning and Teaching Network event was held on 16<sup>th</sup> November 2016 (<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/annual-teaching-fellows-network-event-2016-5387.php>). Both offer networking opportunities for informal discussion as well as structured talks and activities.

The Centre for Academic Development maintains webpages which provide a repository of case studies and other information related to the Theme. This is available at <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/student-transitions-3474.php> and is regularly promoted through ezines to all staff.

The Institutional Steering Group consists of representatives across the Institution including some who chair other Institution-wide Committees such as the Postgraduate and Undergraduate Committees. This means they are able to promote Theme-related activities to different Committees, each of which has representatives from the University's twelve Schools. Those representatives report in to their own Teaching and Learning fora.

To promote the work of the Theme the Institutional lead has attended the University Committee for Teaching & Learning and the Undergraduate and Postgraduate Committees, and regularly attends other Institutional meetings such as School-specific teaching meetings, and the Careers Service Employer Board Careers Service meetings.

The most effective mechanism to disseminate outcomes and resources both internally and externally has been where staff (and students) have had the opportunity to meet and network. Examples of these are the Annual Symposium and Learning & Teaching events, and Enhancement Theme meetings and conferences. It is also worthy of note that several members of the Institutional Steering Group commented at their final meeting about the benefit of being on the Group for the very purpose of being informed and being able to disseminate.

**Outline your approach to collaborative working with other Higher Education institutions and what you perceive as the benefits and challenges.**

**Examples of activities and outcomes through inter-institutional collaboration would be helpful.**

**Approach to Collaborative Activities**

To be as open as possible about our activities and ambitions, and to encourage and facilitate discussion with HEIs who have similar ideas.

**Benefits of Collaborative Activities**

The main benefits of collaborating are sharing perspectives, practice and data.

**Challenges of Collaborative Activities**

Geography and funding constraints limits face-to-face communication; it is often easier to collaborate with someone on your doorstep. It can be difficult to find suitable times to meet and discuss issues and there can be differences in approaches, student profile and demographic of the different Institutions which can limit the value of such collaborations.

**Examples**

Refer to first section.

**To help facilitate the sharing of practice please provide:**

- **a list of the case studies further developed during Year 3 to include student reflective commentary on successful transitions practice (5 examples)**
- **details of your student-facing multimedia resource.**

**You might also wish to report on any aspect of work that you are particularly proud of and want to promote.**

**Case Studies with Reflective Student Commentary**

- Aberdeen City Lab! Where the city is the classroom
- Using Facebook to help aid the transition to University
- Level Up! Student-led Conference
- Students 4 Students: a transitional mentoring scheme for first year undergraduates
- Aberdeen University Students' Association Leadership Academy (now managed by the Careers Service)

**Multimedia Resource**

The student-facing multimedia resource has been produced by a final year student in part based on his own experience but also using information on some of the new initiatives launched as part of the theme. The resource celebrates the end of the Theme by animating the student journey through the various stages of transition.

**What we are particularly proud of**

- The more unified approach to the planning and delivery of student induction and especially the New Student orientation event.
- The Leadership Academy achieved excellent feedback from students as well as the Careers Service Employer Board. From being a student-led initiative it has been brought into the work of the Careers Service in order to manage to growth of interest from students.



- The student booklet 'Online Professionalism and Employability: A guide on how to use social media to become more employable' was initially devised to be an online resource and funded accordingly through Institutional Enhancement Theme funding. However, following a successful launch of a small number of physical booklets at a Careers Service Employer Board meeting and at other Institutional meetings, it was decided to fund 1000 hard copies for distribution.
- As mentioned above, our end of Theme multimedia resource has been produced by a final year student. It has received excellent reviews from all who have seen it including the Institutional Theme Steering Group.
- Annual Academic Development Symposium – this year's symposium has received exceptional feedback, in part because of new approaches taken such as the debate at the end of the event.

**Identify the ways in which your institution has contributed to Theme evaluation and other commissioned work.**

The University of Aberdeen is one of the institutions contributing to the Enhancement Theme-funded 'Open Badges' project in collaboration with the University of Dundee (lead institution) and Abertay University.

**As a result of engaging with the current Enhancement Theme, what has changed/is done differently within your institution and across the sector?**

**It may be helpful to reflect on changes in strategy, policy, practice and how these changes have affected the student learning experience.**

Changes to the University's New Student Induction, now broadened out to all student groups, not just international students, has revolutionised and transformed our approach to induction. Ongoing initiatives involving the use of social media have also emerged and are now very much student facing and are involving engagement of new approaches, apps and technologies.

In 2017-18 there will be a pilot to monitor attendance at lectures following concern that lack of engagement in large group teaching can signal potential issues. It is anticipated that early identification of non-engaging students might help identify students who are experiencing problems in transitioning into or through the University. The monitoring exercise will be followed up with supportive emails to identified students, rather than being a punitive exercise, in order to put measures in place to help the student.

The scoping exercise that was carried out in Year 1 of the Theme noted mental health issues as being a concern especially in PGT/PGR students. Following this the University has implemented a Mental Health Strategy and has held mental health first aid training courses.

**Reflecting on the totality of Theme activity what are your perceptions of both the short and longer term impact of the Theme?**

**It may be useful to refer to the Theme's Logic Model here.**

A large number of initiatives have been put in place as a result of the Theme, the impact of which cannot be identified individually at this point.

In the short term, the Student Transitions Theme has generated significant interest and this has enabled positive and extended sharing and dissemination of practice. It has been observed that it

has been easier to encourage people to take part in discussions about this Theme than in past themes.

In the longer term there is the sense that student transitions, and support provided for students to help with these, has been raised in consciousness across all levels and activities. It is expected that measures put in place as an outcome of theme discussions, such as articulation and orientation days, will have a long term impact.

**Recognising that this is the end of the current Theme, what one piece of advice would you give to colleagues supporting the next Theme?**

Start planning early; the timespan between the QAA sending out the contract, asking for a plan of work and then the University having to report on that work is too short. Plan a strategy for the Theme as soon as it is announced to fit in with strategic priorities.