

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; and help share information across the sector on the benefits and challenges around Theme engagement.

Institution
University of Stirling
Theme Leaders' Group institutional representative(s)
Erica Hensens / Ruth Watkins / Mary McCulloch
Institutional team membership
<p>Theme activity was managed by a Management Group and coordinated by a Working Group.</p> <p>The Management Group membership included: the Academic Registrar; Dean for Student Affairs; Theme Leader; Academic Development Partner; Students' Union Vice President, Education; Students' Union Policy and Research Coordinator; and the Theme Project Officer.</p> <p>The Working Group membership was wide and varied, with around 35 members of staff representing areas across the University involved in the work of the Theme.</p>
Outline what was achieved in relation to your Year 3 plan of work, at the time of submitting this report. Identify what future outcomes are anticipated to be delivered by the end of the Theme. Have there been any unintended outcomes/unexpected findings?
<p>Year 3 activity has progressed as planned and projects have concluded their activity. Final year reporting has been considered, planned and prepared across the year, and in line with requirements, a multi-media resource has been developed which will be provided on the University's website, and used internally. This resource has been developed as a live tool, which will continue to be developed through the addition of further activities and materials as these become available. The resource will therefore exist and be used beyond the scope of the Enhancement Theme.</p> <p>Key points of progress/output in respect to projects in year 3 are noted below.</p> <p>Project: Come on in</p> <p>In year 3 the project has focussed on the legacy of the project's work on supporting the transitions of students from a 'non-traditional' background. As part of this, the new position of Non-Traditional Students' Officer was created in the Student Union's senior decision-making body, the Executive Council. This elected post will facilitate the voices of non-traditional students being clearly and consistently heard within the work of the Union, and more broadly within the University. Within the role, the postholder will undertake an annual campaign or project designed to enhance the non-traditional student experience at the University of Stirling. In 2016/17, the current postholder has undertaken work to develop a care experienced students' package, in conjunction with staff in the University's Student Support team. The package is being designed to comprise multiple support mechanisms to support students from care experienced backgrounds, in respect to the transition in, retention throughout and moving on from University. It is anticipated that the package may specifically include:</p>

- A Care-experienced Students' Bursary
- Allocation of a Personal Mentor
- Support towards the cost of graduation

Project: Going Global

In year 3, the project has focussed on the initially specified objective of:

Respond promptly and efficiently to international student feedback on our services, provision or pastoral support, enabling us to build on strengths and address concerns.

Feedback from international students has been proactively gathered through a range of means including the various student satisfaction surveys (NSS, PTES etc) and focus groups. Additionally, in 2016, the University participated in the International Student Barometer (ISB) survey for the first time since 2010.

Overall, feedback has been positive, and the results from the ISB were extremely positive. Some key highlights included:

- Ranked top in Scotland and in the UK for campus environment with 97.7% satisfaction, against UK and Scottish averages of 92.1%.
- Ranked top in Scotland and second in the UK for sports facilities with 93.8% satisfaction, against a UK average of 82.4% and a Scottish average of 84.4%.
- Ranked top in Scotland for the arrival section with 91.7% satisfaction, against a UK average of 89.3% and a Scottish average of 89.1%.
- Within the learning section, Stirling were ranked top in Scotland for good teachers (92.1% satisfaction), quality lectures (91.2% satisfaction) and performance feedback (85.2% satisfaction).

The survey also highlighted a number of areas for improvement especially around the student accommodation experience. This has helped colleagues in Accommodation Services to identify areas for improvement and an action plan is being developed. Faculties have also been provided with specific faculty responses which will also feed directly into their faculty planning cycle.

Also as a result of feedback, changes were made to the induction process for international students:

- Fewer 'alcohol focused' activities during induction week;
- Tours of campus and local area for international students;
- A revised international student welcome event;
- Welcome guides/web pages updated to include clear, customer friendly language to make it easier for international students to understand;
- Greater promotion of STEER/peer mentoring support to international students.

Project: Upping the ante

The project looked at the challenges faced by students in making the successful transition to Honours level study. The final report on the project established the key characteristics of Honours study in the examined discipline, and showed how the understanding of Honours overlapped, and differed between staff, and students at different stages of their studies. Key themes emerged for Honours understanding among both staff and students. These were as follows:

1. Independence

2. Difficulty, Complexity, Intensity and Expertise

3. Transitioning to a post-university world

Taken together, these themes demonstrate a need for structured support in the transition to Honours, focussing on definitions of independence, and the development of critical thinking skills. While students do understand, and place importance on the changes that take place in the transitions through Honours, the project suggests that they may struggle to articulate these changes, and may miss opportunities to focus and direct their own development in appropriate ways. Moreover, enhanced support for navigating the Honours transition should take care to ensure that appropriate definitions of Honours are established in discussion with students, taking care to include critical aspects of their own definitions, while properly articulating the changes and developments sought by staff.

The project has already started to inform teaching practice within the Psychology Division. Explicit consideration is now being given to the challenges faced by students in transitioning to Honours study, and of the potential for misunderstanding in student expectations. Activities aimed at enhancing students' understanding of Honours study have begun to be introduced, through enhancement of on-going peer mentoring and peer teaching programmes already in place in the Division. Increased linkage of Honours study to earlier years, through activities at the Psychology final year conference aim to increase students' understanding of Honours level study.

Further impact will be achieved through dissemination of the findings and the project report will be hosted on the Stirling University website as part of the institutional digital output for this Enhancement Theme. Alongside the report, summary posters will also be made available, detailing staff and student definitions of Honours study, and final year students' advice to their more junior peers. Finally, at the institutional level, project results will be disseminated via a 'Teaching Bites' session focussed on providing staff with ways of defining and discussing Honours level study in interactions with students. This session will allow the dissemination of best practice information on managing Honours transitions. Support materials used in this session will then be made available online as part of the Enhancement Theme digital output.

Project: Navigating work-places

Development of a Talking Mats Toolkit

Card-sort sets have been developed with the spin-off company Talking Mats, which enhance a students' capacity to consider and action issues they need and want to address as they transition into and out of a workplace. These packs are available to staff, along with training on using the activity in their teaching delivery.

The activity has already been extensively used in work-based learning modules with highly positive student feedback received. Students indicated they felt better equipped to break down and analyse the issues that were important to them, following the card-sort activity.

Work-based Learning Toolkit

A Work-based Learning Toolkit has been developed for staff to use to create and enhance provision. The toolkit also seeks to facilitate quality standards for delivering this type of learning and includes how to support a student's transition in and out of work-based learning. This toolkit will be further developed as the University continues its business engagement strategy and work, but is available to staff in all services and Faculties.

Learning Gain on Work experience and Career Thinking

New learning gain indicators of career planning and experience of the workplace and employment have been developed through the creation of two questions in the matriculation process. The purpose of gathering this data is to capture a picture of where students are on the spectrum of career planning and experience of the workplace and target activity to raise their levels of career planning and exposure to the workplace. This will add significantly to summary evaluation data on employability, tracking student progress in work experience and career thinking at year group, faculty, division and programme level.

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.

Institutional team members, including staff, students and student representatives have engaged positively and proactively with the Student Transitions Enhancement Theme. Internally, participation in both the Management and Working Groups has been consistent and constructive, and a wide range of academic, professional service, student and Students' Union members have contributed to ongoing planning and development, as well as taking forward the various projects and activities which have been undertaken as part of the overall set of work on the Theme.

TLG Meetings

Theme leaders and other members of the Student Transitions team within the University have attended TLG meetings throughout the Theme's life cycle, these have provided opportunities for collaboration, the sharing of ideas, information and support as well as an opportunity to learn more about the approach other institutions are taking to managing their Enhancement Theme work.

Student Network

Student representatives from The University of Stirling have attended and participated in both meetings of the Student Network this year. These meetings allowed our representatives to engage and network with fellow students across the sector, identifying areas of good practice within institutions. Following SHEEC's review of Student Engagement, Stirling has both an institutional and student member on Theme Leaders Group, and this will continue into 2017/18.

International Enhancement Conference

The University has been actively involved in supporting this year's International Enhancement Theme Conference. Nine colleagues from across the University will be delivering presentations on work they have undertaken in relation to the Theme. We would also note the number of sessions being delivered by, or in partnership with our students. Our Students' Union Vice President Education is also involved in supporting a plenary session on evaluating the theme and will be closing the conference with Prof Peter McGeorge.

Institutional Team Event

One of our institutional TLG representatives, and a student representative who are also both members of the University's Enhancement Themes Management Group participated in the Institutional Team Event in November 2016.

Publications

Two members of staff who have been involved in SELF project work have had articles accepted for the special Transitions edition of the 'Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice' due to be published in May 2017. Another paper related to a different SELF project was also published in the online journal 'First Monday'. At least one further publication is also anticipated as a result of Theme activity.

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

An important aim in establishing the Enhancement Theme Management and Working groups was to provide forums in respect to both oversight of activity, and the progressing of projects, which (among other things) would support the Theme Leader in their role. Structured, regular opportunities for discussion amongst relevant colleagues, agreement of actions, and coordination of activity and progress provided support to the Theme Leader.

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.

Internally, approaches to dissemination include:

- Collating and distributing case studies of good practice;
- Development of the Enhancement Theme webpages;
- Dissemination of information and resources via Enhancement Theme team, Professional Service areas engagements, Faculties engagements, regular newsletters etc;
- Promotion of involvement in Enhancement Theme activity by encouraging staff and student participation at the QAA conference in June 2017;
- Active encouragement of staff and student involvement with the Stirling Learning and Teaching Conference in April 2017.

In respect to wider engagement and dissemination:

- Collaboration with other HEIs;
- Two Stirling student representatives are members of SHEEC and contribute to the TLG;
- The Stirling Learning and Teaching conference is open to external delegates;
- Promotion of the Learning and Teaching conference via the Enhancement Theme website;
- Staff and student contributions to the special edition of the Journal of Perspectives on Applied Academic Practice;
- Submission of proposals and presenting at the QAA conference in June 2017.

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.

The University of Stirling routinely adopts a collaborative approach with other institutions and we consider there to be significant benefits from this. Networking with colleagues, sharing good-practice, unpacking common challenges and discussing potential solutions are only some of the opportunities and benefits that come from collaborative working.

In some situations and projects, collaboration can also create challenge through variation in priority or perspective. However determining solutions to such challenges forms a core aspect of successful collaboration, and the potential benefits of collaborative working generally outweigh the effort required to resolve any challenges.

Examples of the University's collaboration during the Theme include:

1. A collaboration between the universities of Stirling and Strathclyde was based around a reciprocal student internship arrangement. Over a summer, a student from Stirling and a student from Strathclyde both undertook a ten-week internship, and both spent a week within this, based at the other institution.

The Stirling student (who is also an active member of the Student Network), spent a week based with the widening access team at the University of Strathclyde. This week at Strathclyde was organised by the Strathclyde student, and a similar arrangement was arranged by the Stirling student. Both students were at their own institution at the time of the other's placement which meant they could shadow each other and collaborate on the practices in each institution.

The remainder of the Stirling student's ten week internship was spent doing research into a widening access project – 'Care Leavers and Young Carers in Scottish Universities'. This involved meeting with a range of professionals from organisations such as Glasgow City Council Social Work Department, CELSIS and MCR Pathways, as well as key staff members from the University of Strathclyde.

The internship provided an invaluable opportunity and insight into how another institution works from the inside, and was a very successful collaboration between the two institutions.

2. A number of institutions have been investigating how they can support Programme Directors in their role of leading programme development and evaluation. Part of this support is to provide mechanisms and resources for these staff to use with their colleagues and students, for students to develop the skills they need for the many transitions that they meet through their programme journey. The resource packages provided through the Enhancement Theme may create a starting point for fostering conversations with Programme Directors about supporting the student transitions. Mary McCulloch (Stirling) and Marcella Kean (UWS) plan to collaborate in order to discuss how academic developers can work with Programme Directors, using these resource packages, and how the Programme Directors can then support transitions, including the integration (rather than segregation) of international students.

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.

The case-studies prepared during the Theme focus on:

1. Dragons' Den event to support 'soft skills' development relevant to the transition into the jobs market.
2. 'What can you do with an Arts and Humanities degree' film relevant to the transition beyond an undergraduate programme.
3. Internal communication approaches to support non-traditional student transitions.
4. The transition of languages students to the compulsory semester abroad.
5. Transition to fourth year and beyond – The Final Year Conference.
6. Making the Most of Masters Legacy Project.
7. Transition from year three to final year of honours in undergraduate programmes in the (then) School of Sport.
8. Students making the transition into an internship during a degree programme.
9. Psychology placement module.
10. Stirling University Computer Club.
11. Stirhack.
12. Psychologically literate citizenship.
13. 'It gave me a good step into University': students' experiences of transition to undergraduate nurse education after a pre-nursing scholarship.
14. Undergraduate to postgraduate transitions.
15. Developing a sense of belonging.

Student reflective commentaries have been submitted in relation to case studies 1, 2, 3, 4, 7 and 8.

The multi-media resource that the University has developed is based around the student-journey, and the range of transitions that students face and encounter within this. With the idea of a journey in mind, we have designed the resource around a 3D map of a section of the University campus, centring on Airthrey Loch. The resource provides interactive access to a range of information resources.

The resources cover a wide variety of materials including: information videos, films and documents; static and interactive PowerPoint presentations; an online module; text guides to support students at key stages of PG and International transitions; a web based resource to learn about statistics; links to information about ongoing project work/events which have been introduced during the Theme like 'Stirhack' and the 'Digital Bootcamp'; student commentaries on a selection of case studies and personal reflections.

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

The University of Stirling has played a prominent role in supporting the evaluation of the current Theme through, for example, two members of staff contributing to a research project being undertaken at the University of St. Andrews to review and evaluate the current operation of the Enhancement Themes.

Our Students' Union Vice President Education will also co-present a plenary session at the upcoming International Enhancement Themes Conference with the Theme Leader, Professor Roni Bamber, which seeks to explore the Scottish HE Sector's journey over the past three years of the theme.

**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.**

The work on the Theme has impacted on the work of the University both directly through the projects/case-studies etc, but also more broadly through the overall discussions and considerations that have taken place as a result of Theme activity.

As noted in an earlier section, work is ongoing to explore how a package of support for care-experienced students can be implemented, work-based learning resources and tools have been developed and are being used, and research outcomes are informing ongoing discussion and planning.

Additionally, the University's approach to student induction has been reviewed and this review has taken account of the range of activity and output that has resulted from the Theme at both institutional and sectoral level. A new student induction planning framework is currently being developed.

**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](#).**

The work that has progressed within the University through the Theme has facilitated not only the various project outcomes and outputs, but also significant discussion and consideration at both faculty/service levels, and the institutional level on the range of transitions that students experience, and how the University currently supports and facilitates these.

The Theme has brought about impact in a number of practical and immediate ways, and has contributed directly to various aspects of the Stirling student experience. However, we believe there will also be a longer term impact through building on progress made during the Theme, and maintaining the focus on supporting student transition. This focus will be maintained at a strategic level through the University's Education and Student Experience Committee, which also provides an important forum for discussion on Theme activity, and cascading of information to colleagues across the University.

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

Careful consideration of the scope of work planned and undertaken in respect to the Theme is important. It will be valuable during the earliest stages of planning to give thought to the scope of planned aims and objectives, and the balance between breadth and depth in terms of what is to be achieved. Ongoing focus on the agreed scope will assist in supporting the realisation of initial plans and ambitions.