

Enhancing practice

# Quality Enhancement Themes: The First Year Experience

Overview of the Enhancement Theme 2006-08:  
The aims, achievements and challenges

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The aims, achievements and challenges

Professor Terry Mayes

# Preface

The approach to quality and standards in higher education (HE) in Scotland is enhancement led and learner centred. It was developed through a partnership of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Universities Scotland, the National Union of Students in Scotland (NUS Scotland) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Scotland. The Higher Education Academy has also joined that partnership. The Enhancement Themes are a key element of a five-part framework, which has been designed to provide an integrated approach to quality assurance and enhancement. The Enhancement Themes support learners and staff at all levels in further improving higher education in Scotland; they draw on developing innovative practice within the UK and internationally. The five elements of the framework are:

- a comprehensive programme of subject-level reviews undertaken by higher education institutions (HEIs) themselves; guidance is published by the SFC ([www.sfc.ac.uk](http://www.sfc.ac.uk))
- enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR), run by QAA Scotland ([www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/ELIR](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/ELIR))
- improved forms of public information about quality; guidance is provided by the SFC ([www.sfc.ac.uk](http://www.sfc.ac.uk))
- a greater voice for students in institutional quality systems, supported by a national development service - student participation in quality scotland (sparqs) ([www.sparqs.org.uk](http://www.sparqs.org.uk))
- a national programme of Enhancement Themes aimed at developing and sharing good practice to enhance the student learning experience, facilitated by QAA Scotland ([www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk)).

The topics for the Enhancement Themes are identified through consultation with the sector and implemented by steering committees whose members are drawn from the sector and the student body. The steering committees have the task of establishing a programme of development activities, which draw on national and international good practice. Publications emerging from each Theme are intended to provide important reference points for HEIs in the ongoing strategic enhancement of their teaching and learning provision. Full details of each Theme, its steering committee, the range of research and development activities as well as the outcomes are published on the Enhancement Themes website ([www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk)).

To further support the implementation and embedding of a quality enhancement culture within the sector - including taking forward the outcomes of the Enhancement Themes - an overarching committee, the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC), chaired by Professor Kenneth Miller, Vice-Principal, University of Strathclyde, has the important dual role of supporting the overall approach of the Enhancement Themes, including the five-year rolling plan, as well as institutional enhancement strategies and management of quality. SHEEC, working with the individual topic-based Enhancement Themes' steering committees, will continue to provide a powerful vehicle for progressing the enhancement-led approach to quality and standards in Scottish higher education.



**Norman Sharp**  
Director, QAA Scotland

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# Acknowledgements

The First Year Enhancement Theme has been very much a team effort. Special thanks must go to Professor Ron Piper, the chair of the steering committee whose contribution was crucial for the Enhancement Theme's success. The members of the steering committee deserve great credit, also, for their collective commitment and willingness to propose innovative approaches through a process that sometimes involved extensive debate.

The **committee members** were:

Professor Ron Piper  
 Dr Pete Cannell  
 Dr Andrew Eadie  
 Dr Leona Elder  
 Dr Simon Guild  
 Mr Bill Johnston  
 Ms Veronique Johnston  
 Dr David Lines  
 Ms Birgitta MacDonald  
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Dr Randy Swing

The Enhancement Theme is also greatly indebted to the project directors (named in the report itself), and to the institutional contacts.

This report has benefited from comments on an earlier draft by many of those acknowledged above.

Terry Mayes  
 January 2009

# I Why an Enhancement Theme for the first year?

The Chair of the First Year Enhancement Theme, Professor Ron Piper, Vice-Principal at the University of St Andrews, explained the background to this Enhancement Theme in the following terms:

If you ask a group of lecturers who have responsibility for coordinating first year programmes of study whether they feel comfortable with what they are able to provide to students, it is remarkable how frequently they express concern. It is not just about the big questions, such as retention statistics. It is about coping with large numbers in the first year, about where to pitch the level of learning so as to address the diverse backgrounds and abilities of entering students without sinking to the lowest common denominator, and about the resources allocated to first year teaching and the status it seems to have amongst academics. Similarly, if you ask a group of staff responsible for student support, they too express concerns - often about students who enter higher education (HE) without a realistic understanding of what will be expected of them and with outside domestic and financial commitments that are going to make any transition into studies more difficult. And, if you ask first year students themselves about their experience, they are full of concern about getting feedback on how they are doing or even knowing what they should be doing. When we launched the First Year Quality Enhancement Theme (First Year ET)...these were exactly the kinds of reactions that we found. It was not a matter of trying to generate an interest in improving the first year of a student's experience of HE; it was a matter of capturing the interest that already existed and discovering how best to provide sector-wide resources to address some of these concerns.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 The nature and purpose of the first year

The Enhancement Theme on the first year commenced in 2005 and very quickly settled on the big question that it sought to address. The question was simply this: 'what should students get out of their first year?' The committee responsible for proposing to the funding council the focus of the Enhancement Themes (the Scottish HE Enhancement Committee - SHEEC) had felt that the time was right to pose such a question in the context of enhancement. There are several strands of evidence that have reported concern about the first year in HE. Most importantly, however, was an increasing recognition by the institutions that the first-year experience is crucial. Not just for the quality of the learning experience that takes place during the first year itself, but crucial for all later learning. The attitudes and habits acquired early on shape the learners' approach to study for the rest of their HE experience, and beyond. As Ron Piper suggested in the piece extracted above, many voices seemed to be expressing concerns about the first year. Students themselves told us that once they have realised that the

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<sup>1</sup> From the Enhancement Themes newsletter, volume 2, issue 2, December 2007, available at: [www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/news/newsletter.asp](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/news/newsletter.asp)

first year 'doesn't count' they quickly adopt a strategy of working to pass assessments, rather than engaging fully with their study. The implication is that many do not become properly equipped (either in skills or strategies) to act subsequently as autonomous and independently motivated learners.

The committee was clear from the start, however, that this Enhancement Theme should not be solely based on the concern that has long dominated our debate about the first year, namely retention and progression. Rather, the goal would be to encourage the sector to consider whether it is offering all students, whatever their initial ability and attitude, and in whatever way they are studying, the encouragement and attention that would make the experience of HE genuinely transforming from the start. If this can be offered, then able and well-equipped students would still be fully stretched throughout the first year in Scottish HE, and those that enter with less well developed personal resources would be given all the help they need to flourish.

Several of the previous Enhancement Themes had already explored the wider context for this question. The context is one of rapid change, and increasing diversity, in the HE experience itself: for students, academics, support staff, and institutions. The main changes are those associated with the shift to mass HE, but this has also been accompanied by significant changes in the wider societal context in which HE functions. The Enhancement Theme's approach to the question, therefore, started by acknowledging the great diversity now to be found in the first-year experience. There is great diversity in the nature of the programmes offering first-year HE, and great diversity in the characteristics of the students entering HE. Add to this the changes in funding policy, the growth of part-time working while in the first year, the new opportunities of flexible and online learning patterns, and not least, the changes brought into HE by the 'network generation'. As the Enhancement Theme progressed in its work it became clearer that almost any general statements about the first year of HE in Scotland today will capture only part of the story.

The proposal for this Enhancement Theme essentially represented an attempt to address the problem from a new direction from those attempted before. The key idea was to explore methods that more closely align the perspectives of the student and the institution, and to consider how responsibility for the educational outcomes might be more evenly distributed between the two. The main thrust of the argument for focusing on the first year is that the time to achieve a shift in something as fundamental as attitude to study is as early as possible in the student's experience of HE.

The Enhancement Theme also acknowledged from the start that it is not helpful to ask continuously for the HE system to be uprooted and radically redesigned. Yet it is important to be aware also of the increasing difficulty of achieving major enhancement gains through teaching and assessment methods that simply call for more of the same, that ask for teaching and support staff to spend more and more time with individual students. For many staff, enhancement means finding ways of teaching 'smarter, not more'. Whether this means major institutional change, or gradual improvements at programme or even module level, is a question that raised its head frequently as the work of the Enhancement Theme progressed.



## 1.2 Engagement and empowerment

Given the complexity of the first year as an area for analysis, it seemed sensible to focus on one or two comparatively simple ideas. The steering committee therefore proposed that the Enhancement Theme should explore possibilities around the concepts of student engagement and student empowerment. It soon became apparent, however, that even these terms are capable of wide interpretation.

In the initial scoping paper the terms engagement and empowerment were defined as follows.

**Engagement** concerns a student's commitment and motivation to study. The issue, then, is to consider what might be done to raise the level of the learner's engagement, with their first-year study, with their personal development, and perhaps with HE life more widely. For a student to be engaged with learning, though, doesn't necessarily imply a deep interest in the subject being studied. It does mean that they are committed to learning, though their drive to do this may stem from instrumental and extrinsic motives about employability, rather than from a fundamental attraction to the subject. The main idea the steering committee wished to explore, though, concerned the influence of peers, and the way in which new entrants quickly pick up the attitudes prevalent in the new culture.

Here, a new approach to induction (perhaps better distinguished as transition and orientation) could be important in establishing a model of a fully committed student, and personal development planning (PDP) should be a process that is seen as important from the start. It was felt important though that the focus should be wider than a student's own profile, and should look also at his or her relationship with peers. A key question for the Enhancement Theme, therefore, was: 'How can an institutional culture acknowledge and help to shape the peer attitudes and norms that are so influential in the first-year experience?'

To address this, the scoping paper<sup>2</sup> included the topics of:

- peer-mentoring, peer-support and peer-tutoring of first-year students by students from later in their programmes
- collaborative work that is carefully designed and carefully led to encourage the nurturing of peer-relationships that engage with learning tasks
- establishing a culture of sharing learning outputs (especially through emerging technology)
- encouraging engagement with employability issues in the first-year curriculum.

**Empowerment** was defined as equipping the first-year student with the competency to learn effectively. The term implies a transformational process. The question here is how to equip students, as close to the start of their studies as possible, with the skills, capacities and knowledge to be effective as independent learners for the rest of their programme, and for their subsequent employability, professional development, and, for that matter, lifelong learning. In short, the term empowerment was seen as pointing to the skills and knowledge required for successful learning. So learners need to be

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<sup>2</sup> The scoping paper can be downloaded from [www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/FirstYear/overview.asp](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/FirstYear/overview.asp)

empowered with the skill to think analytically, to communicate clearly, and to search for and use information effectively. More than this, though, students who come into HE from backgrounds with no previous experience of HE will often lack the **knowledge** of what it takes to be a successful student. This doesn't just refer to the conventional set of transferable skills, but also to less tangible qualities such as confidence about coming to one's own judgement based on an analysis of evidence. As the Enhancement Theme progressed it became apparent that the term 'empowerment' is quite ambiguous, since it can refer also to the student's explicit power to influence the nature of the learning environment and the practices within it. This sense of the term was also addressed by the Enhancement Theme (see section 3). As a topic, empowerment of this kind links directly with issues that have recently been explored in the Scottish Funding Council's (SFC) e-learning transformation programme, where the strapline 'learners in control' was used by the TESEP (Transforming and Enhancing the Student Experience through Pedagogy) project<sup>3</sup>. TESEP trialed a pedagogical approach in which students were responsible for designing their own learning and teaching methods, acting as co-creators of their own content. Also in that programme, the REAP (Re-engineering Assessment Practices) project explored the consequences of giving students the power to influence the way in which they would be assessed.

The emphasis on empowerment and engagement is different from, though not incompatible with, the sector's main emphasis on support. One way of characterising the difference is to argue that most often the concept of learner support is based on criterion models, the support being triggered by a discovered need for help. In contrast, the concept of empowerment is interpreted here as emphasising personalised support for all. Support in that sense will aim to help students achieve as close as possible to their full potential, and in many cases much more than a minimally accepted standard. Personalisation, which became another overarching concept in the Enhancement Theme, conveys the idea that as far as possible provision is tailored to the requirements of the individual. This would imply that students must receive quite intensive feedback early on, so that a profile of the students' requirements can be established. In dialogue with tutors, a plan should then be agreed for the student's activity. There are links here with PDP, personal tutoring systems and e-portfolios. Personalisation demands a rethink about the nature of induction: perhaps to design and resource an extended set of activities over a semester, or even extending throughout the entire first year. From the start, then, this Enhancement Theme acknowledged the need to build on the work done on induction best practice in the Responding to Student Needs Enhancement Theme, in which wide-ranging approaches are considered and framed conceptually.

The diversity already to be found in the sector implies that some programmes, particularly those with a strong vocational element, will already pursue some of the approaches outlined above. One aim of the Enhancement Theme was to identify examples of successful practice in the engagement and empowerment of students early on in their HE experience, to describe these fully within their wider context, and to try to draw out their significance for other areas of the sector. The key to understanding what works more widely is to acknowledge the context-bound nature of the first-year experience.

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<sup>3</sup> See [www2.napier.ac.uk/transform](http://www2.napier.ac.uk/transform)

### 1.3 An emphasis on success

This Enhancement Theme also set out to examine the nature of the first-year curriculum: the relation of what students are expected or encouraged to study in the first year, to the nature of what might appropriately be expected of them as they proceed with their subsequent programmes. It is widely argued now that 'bolt-on' generic skills courses are generally unsatisfactory as a co-curriculum. However, the fundamental question is raised here: what kind of grounding for lifelong learning can be constructed through HE? How far, in their first year, should students engage with learning, and of what kind, beyond the boundaries of a conventional programme? There is an important issue of breadth versus depth, and an issue of the extent to which the co-curriculum can be owned by the students themselves. The Responding to Student Needs Enhancement Theme had argued for a broad strategic approach in which a wide group of stakeholders (including academic and support staff, managers, employers, parents, funding agencies as well as students) is actively involved in curriculum planning.

A key distinguishing feature of this Enhancement Theme, it was proposed, should be an **emphasis on success** rather than on the avoidance of failure. The first year in HE should reward commitment, rather than reward doing just enough, and should strive to communicate to new students the privilege and excitement of the new opportunities in front of them. Engaged and highly motivated learning should become the accepted cultural norm from the first day. This is far from what many students currently describe as their experience on entering HE. The current situation in some parts of HE seems, in contrast to focusing on success, rather more centred on mere progression. Implications of this are illustrated in this quote from a student, looking back at her first year:

I came to University full of enthusiasm and expecting to work much harder than I had at school. Within the first two weeks I realised that the first year didn't really count so I got a part-time job in a bar and I never really looked at anything outside classes unless I had an assignment to hand in. I wasn't stretched at all.

## 2 The Enhancement Theme's methods

### 2.1 The engagement of the institutions

The methods employed by the Enhancement Themes have been developing in the direction of more direct involvement by the Scottish HE institutions in the Enhancement Theme's activity. The First Year Enhancement Theme was designed to achieve such involvement by formally appointing to represent the Enhancement Theme in each institution someone who had a special interest in, or responsibility for, the first year. These 'institutional contacts' were asked to communicate within their institution with others having a direct interest in the Enhancement Theme, to report back to the steering group on the institution's thinking about the first year, and to raise awareness generally in the institution about the Enhancement Theme. Institutions were given some direct funding to help them undertake activities, focusing on their own approach to the issues raised in the Enhancement Theme. The institutions reported individually on the various ways in which each had engaged with the Enhancement Theme, and indicated how each was planning to take forward some of the issues raised.

A number of challenges to the institutions are presented in section 6 of this overview. These reflect the key debates about the first year that have emerged strongly during the work of the Enhancement Theme.

### 2.2 The commissioned reports

The steering group invited proposals from the sector for a number of studies on key aspects of the first year. These had been identified after considering the recent reviews on the first year from the Higher Education Academy, and after consultation with the institutional contacts, the Enhancement Theme's advisers, and the international visitors. Seven projects were funded, with the following titles and report authors:

- *Transition to and during the first year* (Whittaker, R, Glasgow Caledonian University)
- *Personalisation of the first year* (Knox, H and Wyper, J, University of Paisley)
- *Peer support in the first year* (Black, F and MacKenzie, J, University of Glasgow)
- *Transforming assessment and feedback: enhancing integration and empowerment in the first year* (Nicol, D, University of Strathclyde)
- *Curriculum design for the first year* (Bovill, C, Morss, K and Bulley, C, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh)
- *Personal Development Planning in the first year* (Miller, K, Calder, C, Martin, A, McIntyre, M, Pottinger, I and Smyth, G, PDP in Higher Education (Scotland) Network)

- *Introducing scholarship skills: academic writing* (Alston, F, Gourlay, L, Sutherland, R and Thomson, K, Napier University)

Each of these projects was asked to provide a literature review, case studies of current or future good practice, and recommendations for the sector. They were also asked to run a workshop. Most of these were delivered at the 2007 and 2008 annual Enhancement Themes conferences, and the PDP and Peer support projects held a joint conference in May 2007.

In addition, two sector-wide studies of current views were funded:

- George Gordon conducted a series of discussions across the sector about the institutions' views on the nature and purposes of the first year in Scottish HE. In addition, he was commissioned to produce a short report focusing on initiatives from other HE sectors and institutions beyond Scotland.
- Rowena Kochanowska and Bill Johnson from the University of Strathclyde conducted sector-wide discussions with students about their expectations, experiences and reflections on the first year.

All of these projects have reported, and are summarised in section 3 below<sup>4</sup>.

### 2.3 The events

Throughout the duration of the Enhancement Theme regular sector-level events were organised, and the First Year Enhancement Theme provided a central focus for both the 2007 and 2008 annual Enhancement Themes conferences. Some events were organised around visits from international experts in the first year of HE, including Dr Betsy Barefoot from the Policy Center of the First Year of College, Brevard, North Carolina; Professor Kerri-Lee Krause of Griffiths University, Australia; and Dr Randy Swing, Executive Director of the Association for Institutional Research, USA.

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<sup>4</sup> The full reports are available at: [www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/FirstYear/outcomes.asp](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/FirstYear/outcomes.asp)

## 3 The focus on practice: the commissioned reports

### 3.1 Transition to and during the first year

Ruth Whittaker's report on transition to and during the first year emphasises just how crucial is an adequate preparation for the first year, but makes it clear that there is now little chance of a 'one size fits all' approach being successful. The increasing heterogeneity of the student population requires a range of approaches and a flexible system of support. This means that institutions need a good understanding of particular factors that will impact on particular groups of learners within their own programmes, and gaining such understanding means carrying out an analysis on adequate data. It calls for a coordinated approach that starts well before entry to HE, and continues throughout the first semester. Pre-entry support is vital for enabling students to make informed choices, and for setting their expectations in a realistic way. Their preparation for study should be supported through online methods, school and college liaison, campus visits, peer mentoring schemes, and collaborative work with schools, colleges and the community. Pre-entry should be viewed as the start of a longitudinal and personalised process of induction which begins at the point of application and continues to the end of the first year and deals with social as well as academic progress.

In line with the broad approach of the Enhancement Theme, the report on transition argues for the shifting of focus away from retention and withdrawal, to one of engaging and empowering all students. Successful transition will be measured 'not simply in terms of whether students continue on their programmes but, in doing so, are provided with the opportunity to achieve their full potential'. The report calls for institutions to place a greater strategic importance on the first year and to integrate this within an institution's business model as a core activity. The full development of a pedagogy of first-year teaching should combine academic, social and personal aspects in an integrated curriculum. It is very challenging to design a curriculum that addresses, for example, social networking and early engagement with academic staff and peers, along with personalised skills development towards self-directed learning, and integrate all this into mainstream teaching. This may well involve giving central support services a much more integrated role in the delivery of the curriculum than is typically the case at present, which in turn will only be achieved by raising the strategic importance of the first year at an institutional level. It also probably means a greater overall investment in the first year through the front-loading of resources, and, as with all aspects of the Enhancement Theme, it calls for a raising of the value placed on staff who specialise in first-year teaching, and for the explicit funding of institutional research into the area.

Whittaker's report describes some 28 examples of practice in transition support, including several international examples, and concludes with 10 case studies, mostly from across the Scottish sector.

### 3.2 Personalisation of the first year

The report by Hazel Knox and Janette Wyper gets to grips with the rather slippery concept of personalisation in HE, and examines how it might apply to the design of the first year. The idea of personalisation is associated with a current political agenda across all areas of public sector services, but, as the report makes clear, it can be interpreted in a number of subtly different ways when applied in HE. The report makes a valuable contribution by bringing out these different interpretations and examining them in the context of policy, and through six case studies. The personalisation 'themes' that emerged from four participative workshops with a wide range of HE staff were as follows:

- to counter the effects of large class sizes
- to take account of preferred learning styles of individual students
- to engage and empower students by adopting pedagogies that are student centred, thus shifting the axis of power from the institution, its staff and its curricula, to the individual student
- to exploit the potential benefits of new electronic technologies
- to address issues of transition
- to maximise the benefits to the student of PDP.

The report takes a framework of the 'student life cycle' and considers each stage by giving examples of personalisation from existing practice. Case studies are then presented from the Open University, the University of Dundee, Napier University, Anglia Ruskin University, Oxford Brookes University and the University of Edinburgh.

The key issue, of course, is not so much how to achieve personalisation, but how to do so effectively within the resources realistically available. The suggestions that emerge all involve changing the way institutions currently operate. Partly, they centre on the need to exploit more imaginatively the possibilities around peer interaction, not just through measures to encourage socialisation, as with buddy schemes, but also by involving peer learners more directly in pedagogy, through peer support for learning. They emphasise the potential of technology for social networking and other aspects of Web 2.0<sup>5</sup>, and argue for ramping up the IT training that can be provided to ensure that every student is fully empowered to exploit the online possibilities for personalisation. They also, of course, involve moving pedagogy in the direction of the co-creation of resources and knowledge, giving first-year students more responsibility, and thus a more personal sense of ownership, in shaping their individual learning activity. Such an approach is also explored in the curriculum design project (sub-section 3.5).

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<sup>5</sup> The term Web 2.0 is often used to describe the changes in internet capabilities and use from being a source of information, to becoming a platform for content creation, social interaction, learning, and more.

### 3.3 Peer support in the first year

In their report on peer support in the first year, Fiona Black and Jane MacKenzie explore examples of horizontal peer support, where students in the same year group provide support for each other, and vertical peer support, where more senior students support those in the first year. They also make an interesting distinction between explicit and implicit forms of support. The former are practices introduced deliberately to facilitate peer support, as in peer-assisted learning (PAL) schemes, while practices that emerge as a consequence of the normal activity of a course are termed implicit practices. Among the nine case studies are mentoring or buddying schemes, extending throughout the first year, and in some cases starting pre-entry. Also described in a case study is a PAL scheme. The report also points to a form of explicit peer support that has been widely adopted in the USA but is as yet rare in the UK - the student learning community (SLC). This type of initiative involves students meeting regularly in a small group, perhaps a freshman interest group or first-year seminar. These groups are given some academic or mentoring support and are often situated in residential halls. Explicit peer support usually involves students who have recently been successful in the first year becoming mentors or facilitators in their second year. Not only is this of benefit to the new first-year student, but there is a strong empowering aspect for the student who is now in the role of mentor. This is a good example of how HE institutions can benefit from a critical advantage: learners gain enormously from being placed in the role of teacher.

Turning to implicit forms of support, the report notes that many pedagogical practices involving students working together in small groups have become rarer in the first year, where their impact should be greater. The case studies chosen describe good practice in collaborative academic work, with the implicit benefits for socialisation. One that shows a particularly striking example of imaginative design is the vertical project at Glasgow Caledonian University, where students from three different years work together on a single project. Their role in the project changes as they progress from year to year, starting as a kind of apprentice, and finishing as a project manager. The underlying message of all the implicit peer support examples is that imaginative course design should be exploited to maximise the opportunities to foster peer support.

Black and MacKenzie's report goes on to look closely at how both physical and virtual learning spaces could be designed to facilitate peer support. Learning spaces specifically designed with first-year students in mind are needed, and the virtual environment also offers powerful opportunities for first-year students to build an identity online, and to feel part of a real community of learners.



### 3.4 Transforming assessment and feedback: enhancing integration and empowerment in the first year

It was expected, of course, that David Nicol's report on formative assessment and feedback in the first year would emphasise the central role this plays in both academic and social integration. However, the report goes much further than describing a range of good practice examples in formative assessment. It offers a powerful framework for analysing formative assessment with our key concepts of engagement and empowerment, and linking these to the concepts of academic and social integration. Figure 1 summarises this framework neatly.

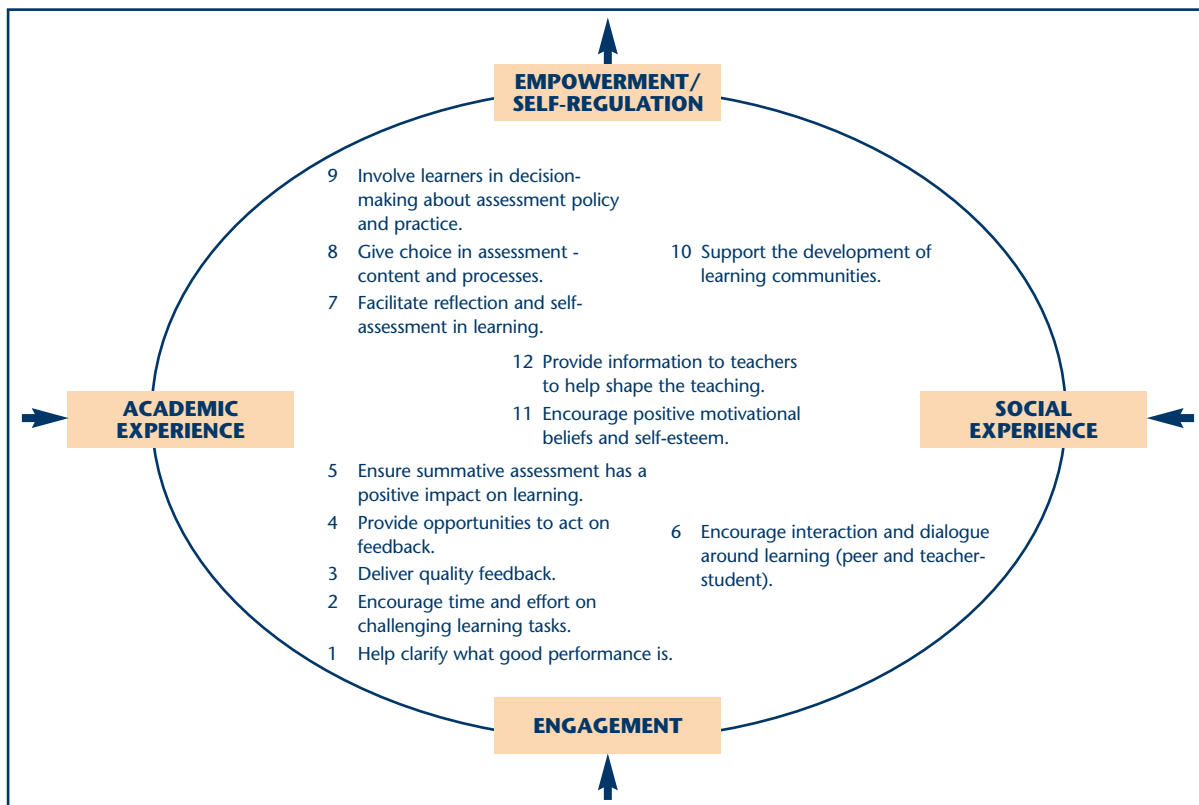


Figure 1: assessment principles and their application to the first year

The report lists 12 formative assessment principles (shown in Figure 1). These principles have proved to be robust and have been used successfully in the redesign of assessment in 19 modules across a range of disciplines in the Re-engineering Assessment Practices (REAP) project, a recently completed project in the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) funded e-learning transformation programme. The report positions each of the principles in the space defined by the two dimensions of academic experience-social experience, and engagement-empowerment. Any assessment principle could be more or less supportive of the development of learner self-regulation (and the report offers a thoughtful analysis of how self-regulation relates to the engagement-empowerment dimension). Taking principle 1, for example, a teacher might 'clarify what good performance is' by providing students, in advance of an assignment, with examples of the kind of work required (for instance, some examples of essays from previous student cohorts). Alternatively, the teacher might organise a session where students are required to examine these essay examples to identify which is better and why. The second approach would usually be more supportive of the development of learner

self-regulation than the first, because the student would be more actively engaged in constructing, internalising and owning the assessment criteria. As the report puts it:

The important point is that if students are given an active, responsible role in the implementation of a principle, this is more likely to develop learner self-regulation. Taking this further, the most empowering scenario might be one where (for example in later years of study) students feel able to organise their own active engagement with criteria and even question their appropriateness or validity. (*Transforming assessment and feedback...* p 20)

Each of the 12 principles is discussed in this way, and examples and case studies are used to clarify how the principles can work in practice, particularly at the stage of course redesign.

### 3.5 Curriculum design for the first year

In their work on curriculum design, Catherine Bovill, Kate Morss and Cathy Bulley found that there was agreement about an ideal first-year curriculum design within the literature, staff workshops, student focus groups and case studies from the HE sector. However, some work within the case studies seemed ahead of the literature. Most of the features of an ideal curriculum as expressed by practitioners or students strongly echo the themes emerging across the other practice-focused studies, though they are not necessarily well supported yet by curriculum evaluation data. Thus, there is wide agreement about the importance of early and frequent formative assessment, and the importance of small groups. There is also strong agreement for a broadly constructivist pedagogy in the first year, emphasising the importance of allowing the students more control over their own learning, and taking enquiry-based approaches. Many of the issues discussed under the headings of transition and peer-support - particularly emphasising the social dimension - feature strongly here as well.

Nevertheless, this report brings out some interesting themes of its own. It explores in some depth the idea of empowering students as participants in the curriculum design process itself. Indeed, this was the practice-based project that most directly engaged in dialogue with students as part of its methodology. It seems perfectly good practice to involve student representatives, say, in course design procedures, and to take full account of feedback from student questionnaires in such procedures, but the report presents a more radical approach. This involves drawing students into a participative role over the design of their own course. As we have seen, there is strong support for the idea of students and staff co-creating content. This is a theme that is well discussed in the general pedagogy literature in HE, particularly in the context of networked learning. This co-creation approach extends to allowing students control over their own learning activities, and to some extent their own learning methods. A natural step from that is to involve students in designing the curriculum itself. Of course, there are many issues raised by this idea, some of which will relate to the flexibility accorded to the running of a course after it has been designed through the institution's quality assurance procedures. Other issues will relate to first-year students' understanding and knowledge that would render them suitable or not for an active role in course design. The report argues that further research is necessary in this area, but suggests that this approach may have potential to contribute to the principles of engagement and enhancement. In one of the report's case studies there is a description of the early stages of working

with students, where they lacked confidence in what they could contribute, but how - when well managed - students would gain the necessary confidence over time through stepped progress and feedback from peers and tutors.

This study also sought views about curricular structure in the first year. However, there was very little evidence in the literature of ideal curricular structure in the first year and the report states that:

...nowhere in the literature review or during staff workshops were issues of common foundation courses in the first year or debates about different modular structures within the first-year curriculum discussed in any depth. Yet individual academic staff raised a number of debates about the structure of the first-year curriculum as being of interest. (*Curriculum design for the first year*, p 26)

Bovill, Morss and Bulley's report concludes that the issue of curricular structure in the first year needs further research, with much of the debate currently taking place informally between academic staff. The length and depth of first-year modules, the idea of a core curriculum, the place of the first year in the Scottish four-year honours degree, the notion of a year long transition, the integration of generic skills - all these raise the prospect of root and branch reform. The report outlines a model of an 'ideal first-year curriculum design' process which takes a 'birds' eye view' of the curriculum, but the authors also suggest some practical and more gradual adaptations where comprehensive reforms are not possible. We will return to this crucial issue in section 6.

### 3.6 Personal development planning in the first year

The report on PDP by Kirsty Miller, Colin Calder, Allan Martin, Maureen McIntyre, Isabelle Pottinger and Geri Smyth, provides a comprehensive review of the place of PDP in the sector currently (including the positioning of this study alongside the several other initiatives on PDP in Scotland), and provides a thoughtful account of what might still be required by way of 'buy-in' from funders, institutions, staff and students themselves if it is to fulfil its promise as an empowering method for first-year students. After reviewing the literature, selecting case studies, and listening to the views of workshop participants, the report makes several recommendations which are helpfully grouped thematically.

The report acknowledges that there is no uniform understanding of PDP, and notes that it can be interpreted in quite different ways within different areas in a single institution. It may also be defined differently in other sectors, and a further source of uncertainty is brought by confusion surrounding the nature and purpose of e-portfolios. The report states:

From the different models of PDP in practice, the evidence suggests that 'one size does not fit all', and that such diversity is therefore an essential feature of PDP. However, this lack of uniformity can affect a first-year student's experience by conveying mixed messages about purpose, process and outcomes....  
(*Personal Development Planning in the first year*, p 8)

The key point is that PDP, 'or some other system of relationships, activities and tools', should be implemented as a means of enabling students to gain an awareness of

themselves as developing learners, and to plan the actions that will further their own personal and career development - thereby underpinning an explicit statement by the institution of the 'support entitlement'. To effectively implement PDP in the first year, though, requires effort: to provide time for students, their peer mentors, their academic advisers and their teachers to be fully prepared for, and engaged with, the process. One very practical idea is to involve the careers service in implementing PDP in non-vocational degrees (where the links to career planning are less tangible than in vocational degrees).

The report argues that PDP can make an important contribution to a student-centred pedagogy, in enabling students to form a full picture of themselves as learners. However, it is essential to be explicit about pedagogical approaches, including assessment, and the relationship of PDP processes to them. In the context of current practice, assessment of the PDP process is essential for engagement by the majority of students. It is an interesting challenge to design forms of assessment (for example, peer assessment) that do not actually discourage genuine and insightful reflection.

The report points to evidence that all HE institutions, without exception, now claim to be implementing PDP, though in many programmes this means little more than that an electronic PDP tool has been provided. The report makes clear the widespread view that PDP cannot be reduced to a purely online process that involves little or no input from teachers, advisers or support staff. It echoes the call in the other projects for a higher level of engagement from staff, which must be achieved through a clearer account of the benefits for everyone of fully implementing PDP, and fully integrating it into both the academic and social aspects of the first-year experience.

### 3.7 Introducing scholarship skills: academic writing

The final practice-based study, by Fran Alston, Lesley Gourlay, Ros Sutherland and Karen Thomson, looked in detail at a fundamental skill for learners in HE, that of academic writing. The concept of scholarship in academic writing is defined in the report as the ability to:

...appraise and select from a large volume of information; conduct primary research; select appropriate information to answer the research questions raised; and communicate the outcomes effectively. (*Introducing scholarship skills: academic writing*, p 4)

Where and how can this skill be taught, in a content-laden curriculum? It would appear that students and academics may both underestimate the challenge faced in the first year. There is research evidence that most students, made confident by their recent success in national examinations, expect to be able to cope with first-year academic work. Academics, most of whom see their teaching role as almost entirely related to teaching subject content, also expect students to be able to cope with producing academic writing of an acceptable standard in the first year of their degree. Currently, the expectations of both groups seem to be disappointed. Academics report that their students are not coming to them equipped for self-regulated learning, and academic writing in particular. As the report puts it:

The change in focus, assessment types and study requirements in fact represent a change of culture. This is not necessarily recognised by academics, and probably only recognised in hindsight by students. (*Introducing scholarship skills: academic writing*, p 6)

Academics, however, although not keen to be involved in teaching 'skills' rather than their subject, seem to feel that the technical aspects of writing are not the main challenge for students. Rather, it is a more holistic constellation of attitudes, ways of thinking critically, reflection, and specific knowledge and understanding about finding and analysing information. The term to describe this is 'academic literacy'.

The report discusses various approaches, notes the demise of the 'bolt-on' skills approach - called here the 'study skills' approach - and considers what is in a sense the default model of writing development in HE, academic socialisation. This is implicitly based on the assumption that students will pick up the skills they need as they become inculcated into the university culture. A more explicit version of this takes the study skills model and builds on it through inducting students deliberately into the language and techniques of the subject discipline. Evidence from all the sources drawn on for this study suggests that what works best is a planned, integrative, cross-disciplinary/multi-stranded approach to developing academic literacy. This is the key recommendation of the report, illustrated by the selected case studies. It implies, once again, a collaboration between subject teachers, and 'support' staff - educational developers, IT specialists, information scientists, careers staff and so on - all fully involved in course redesign from the start, all being recognised as part of a team contributing to the goal of academic literacy for every student. Once more, then, this is a call for a rethink about the first year by taking some striking examples of good practice and distilling these into a set of high-level recommendations.

## 4 Voices from the sector

### 4.1 Views and actions in the institutions

George Gordon was commissioned by the Enhancement Theme steering committee to conduct a sector-wide series of discussions with the institutions themselves probing their own current perspectives on issues raised in this Enhancement Theme. His report underlines many of the conclusions reached by the practice-based projects, suggesting that the gap between the perspectives on the first year of policy-makers, senior managers, practitioners and students is smaller than might have been anticipated. The report confirms the institutions' commitment to more fully understanding and enhancing the students' experience of the first year. Overall, it seems only the priority given to retention that currently differentiates Scottish HE institutions in the context of enhancing the first-year experience.

George Gordon's report does highlight the widespread concerns about the status of first-year teaching. Although the status of teaching in general was brought clearly into focus by the newly devised criteria for placing every academic within a new salary framework, the report notes that the opportunity to distinguish first-year teaching as a specific subset was overlooked. The report recommends that discussions with senior managers in Scottish HE institutions should be held specifically on the topic of the status of first-year teaching.

Overall, it was recorded that there is an impressive range of active institutional approaches to the issues raised by this Enhancement Theme. The Enhancement Themes invite a particular focus, but they should not obscure the fact that institutions are continually building and reflecting on earlier initiatives and policy development.

### 4.2 The student voice

The aim of the sector-wide study of current student perspectives conducted by Bill Johnston and Rowena Kochanowska was to gain a clearer understanding of students' expectations and experience of the first year of undergraduate study, both at an institutional and at national (Scottish) level. The study also surveyed how institutions sought and used feedback from their students, and it sought information on first-year initiatives and examples of good practice at institutional level which could be shared across the sector. The authors also undertook a comparison of their study with national student surveys conducted in the UK (NSS), America (NESSE) and Australia (CEQ).

Meetings were held with undergraduates from across a wide range of disciplines in 16 of the 20 HE institutions across Scotland. The meetings were intended as an opportunity for in-depth discussion with individual students about their perceptions of the first year and provided a snapshot in time of opinion across the Scottish sector. Discussions were intended to provide qualitative rather than quantitative information on the student experience of the first year in Scottish HE, as seen from the student perspective. Each meeting consisted of both a pyramid discussion and a focus group session.

This study was not a survey, and did not claim to be representative of student opinion in general across Scottish HE institutions. The data was idiographic - that is, illuminative. If at least some students experience the first year in the way described, then the sector should listen carefully and make its own judgements about the importance of the views expressed.

The report details a number of practical suggestions for improving the first-year experience raised by the students themselves. Most of these link very well to the conclusions of some of the practice-focused projects. The authors make the point that there is rather good evidence here for the case made in the curriculum design project that students' views, and students themselves, are a valuable resource in reshaping the first year. Those that took part in this study took the task seriously and gave considered and generally balanced responses clearly aimed at addressing current issues and enhancing the experience for future students.

Overall, this study reinforces the concerns that have formed the background to the First Year Enhancement Theme, gives very good support for many of the recommendations made by the practice-based projects, and generally replicates the student views reported by these. The authors conclude that we are not expecting enough of students in the first year. They also argue that the student views give us good reason to look again at the Scottish four-year honours degree. These students expressed disquiet about the structure of degree programmes based on faculty entry, in which students are not 'owned' by a department until entering honours. Many issues are raised by the perceived negative consequences of this, not least that of how to locate the first year within a lifelong learning framework. There were also particular concerns about the experience of international students. Finally, the report emphasises once again the finding that emerges most clearly from all attempts to capture the authentic voice of first year students:

The most consistent and heartfelt plea from almost all students has been for more, and more meaningful, feedback on their work to enable them to adapt to the new ways of learning, to have some notion of whether they are doing what is required of them or not, and to enable them to improve. (*Student expectations, experiences and reflections on the first year*, in press)

## 5 Related Influences

### 5.1 The international context

The report by George Gordon, *The nature and purposes of the first year: sharing and reflecting on international experiences and initiatives*, makes it clear that the Scottish interest in the first-year undergraduate experience of HE is part of a wider international focus on the topic, reflected by a rapidly growing literature, and an increasing number of dedicated national and international conferences (for example European, American, South African, Australasian/Pacific Rim, Japanese). The report describes some particularly relevant initiatives, from the University of Auckland, the University of Washington, the University of South Carolina and the University of Melbourne. It also considers the 2005 Australian report by Krause and others which extracts key messages from a decade of national studies of the first-year experience in Australian universities, and reflects on the opportunity offered to the Hong Kong HE institutions as they switch from three to four-year undergraduate programmes. Overall, we see that Scotland has much to learn from these international developments, while also making a leading contribution ourselves to the growing evidence base.

### 5.2 Links with the Research-Teaching Linkages Enhancement Theme

Almost all of the reports from the practice-based projects note in some way the synergy between the First Year Enhancement Theme and the previous Enhancement Themes. The first year represents the point at which student needs are most keenly expressed, assessment is most potent in its formative effect, and employability issues start to shape attitudes and approaches to learning and curriculum requirements. Much of the First Year Enhancement Theme has also pointed to the need for an increasingly flexible delivery of the first-year curriculum.

Less obvious, but just as important, is the link between the two Enhancement Themes that ran almost concurrently: First Year and Research-Teaching Linkages. The report, by Ray Land and George Gordon, on the sector-wide discussions on the Research-Teaching Linkages Theme, argues convincingly that the wider adoption of some more explicit research-teaching linkages would go some way towards achieving the gains in the first-year experience sought by our First Year Enhancement Theme. The key idea is to 'foster research-mindedness early'. Indeed, the disciplinary projects indicated that there was evidence of a wide range of examples of individual courses that have established effective ways of linking teaching and research in the introductory years<sup>6</sup>. The argument here is that engaging students in research-type activities, (for example, enquiry-based approaches, critiquing papers, generating research information, debating issues) will encourage the students to gain some of the benefits that have been discussed in the First Year Enhancement Theme as self-regulation or academic literacy.

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<sup>6</sup> Discipline projects can be viewed at:  
[www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/ResearchTeaching/outcomes.asp](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/ResearchTeaching/outcomes.asp)



There is a further point worth making here. The Research-Teaching Linkages Enhancement Theme has noted the difficulty in engaging with the Enhancement Theme staff, who see themselves primarily on the 'research-side'. By couching the challenge of first-year teaching in terms of 'research-mindedness' it is possible that a more authentic integration of research and teaching could be achieved than that previously encouraged by the Research Assessment Exercise<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> The Research Assessment Exercise was conducted jointly by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Scottish Funding Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland. The primary purpose of the RAE 2008 was to produce quality profiles for each submission of research activity made by institutions. For more information, see: [www.rae.ac.uk](http://www.rae.ac.uk)

## 6 Challenges for the institutions and the sector: a first year fit for purpose?

### 6.1 Produce a first-year strategy

The overriding conclusion from the Enhancement Theme's outputs is that there is very broad agreement - in the literature and across the views expressed by those practitioners most closely involved in the first year - over the need for a set of reforms that will enhance the first year. Not just reforms that enhance the lived experience of being a first-year student in Scottish HE, but reforms that allow the first year to establish the foundation for success in later years in HE, in subsequent employment, and in lifelong learning. There is a good degree of unanimity over the nature of the reforms, though no clear agreement on how to achieve them. In some of the reports there are recommendations requiring major changes to current structures and procedures. It seems probable that change on the scale called for would need to be driven through an institution-level strategy, though the support for giving a new priority to the first year would need to be secured at school or faculty level before the implementation would be effective.

One might argue that it is fairly straightforward to draft a first-year enhancement strategy for an HE institution, at least in terms of aspirations. An implementation plan would be more demanding to write. The challenge for the institutions, then, is to produce a **first-year strategy** that addresses the concerns and proposals highlighted in the outputs of this Enhancement Theme. Such a strategy should commit to implementation, directly addressing the shifts in resources implied by the priorities expressed. The first-year strategy might well have the same prominence strategically as the other core institutional strategies, such as business development, research, and learning and teaching. It would also serve to provide coherence for the initiatives typically taking place in each Scottish HE institution, as evidenced by the reports provided by the institutional contacts.

### 6.2 Shift resources to the first year

Many of the enhancement proposals from our reports require more time and resources to be devoted to support that is not directly subject-teaching based. This would seem to imply that the Enhancement Theme is calling for a shift in resources to the first year from later years, and perhaps from subject teaching to other forms of provision. Yet it may be misleading to express it like this. The argument essentially centres on a hypothesis (there is scant evidence in the literature yet). This hypothesis is that a higher investment in the first year will lever greater returns in later years of study, giving an overall gain. To put it simply: establish a higher level of engagement and empowerment of all first-year students, and the **need for support in later years will reduce** by an amount greater than the first-year investment. More than this, however, is the argument that learning outcomes will become deeper, and the satisfaction level of both teachers and students will increase.

### 6.3 Raise understanding about the first year and its importance

The outputs from this Enhancement Theme reveal a considerable diversity in the experience of the first year across Scottish institutions, programmes and students. They also reveal a complex interweaving of factors that impact on that experience. The challenge here is to **raise the level of understanding** of the issues, both for senior managers and for staff delivering or supporting first-year programmes. This involves raising the importance of staff development in this area and devising methods which engage and empower the staff.

Following directly from this challenge, institutions might consider whether they might gain significantly from investing in activities which will give better data about, and real insight into, the first-year experience. This means allocating resources to methodologies that go well beyond the straightforward recording of statistics about academic performance, or data about potential withdrawals, or feedback questionnaires to students. This involves funding research into the institution's own core business. An example of good practice in this area is the Student Experience Project, funded by Glasgow Caledonian University for the last five years and carried out by its own (and the University of Stirling's) Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning. Indeed, ensuring that the authentic student voice is the central component in gaining a full understanding of the issues, must be regarded as a real research issue demanding a robust methodology. It is also important that students themselves are at the centre of debates about the interpretation of the data.

### 6.4 Raise the status of first-year teaching

In retrospect, the Enhancement Theme might usefully have commissioned a study on the status of first-year teaching. It is hard to identify robust evidence on this issue, but many views were expressed during the Enhancement Theme pointing to the gradual decline in the status given to the teaching of first-year students. The practice of the first-year course being led by the most prestigious academic in a discipline, as an inspiration for students to commit to the subject, and as an acknowledgement that first-year teaching is the most valuable of all, has largely declined in Scottish universities. First-year tutorials, where arguably the key teaching occurs, are widely taken by graduate teaching assistants. While it is true that these tutors will probably have a better understanding of first-year student culture than more senior teaching staff, their relative lack of teaching experience will render the learning experience of their students more variable, to put it at its mildest. A clear challenge for institutions, then, is to **raise the status of first-year teaching**. Institutions might consider whether direct steps need to be taken to recognise first-year teaching as a specialist kind of teaching, to be valued and rewarded more highly by the institution, for which it represents a crucial investment.

## 6.5 Academic literacy as the integrating concept

A succinct way of capturing most of the goals of first-year learning, teaching, assessment and socialisation in a single phrase is to seek to achieve **academic literacy** for all students. The concept of academic literacy encompasses 'research-mindedness', which should be introduced as early as possible in the first-year curriculum. To achieve this will require, in many areas, substantial change in pedagogy: moving firmly away from a 'delivery' approach and embracing methods that place the learner in an active enquiry role from the start. This, in turn, emphasises the need to support the attainment of a high level of digital literacy among all first-year students, which requires the institution to pay more attention to the patterns of skill and behaviour students bring with them as they enter HE.

This concept is gaining currency as a way of integrating both generic and discipline-based skills and bringing together both academic and support staff. It also gives a new meaning to the institutional mantra of being 'student-centred'. Students themselves should be afforded a central role in helping to design a first-year curriculum based on academic literacy. One further - and very significant - gain would be to bring into closer alignment the research and teaching cultures. The personalised achievement, for every student, of the highest possible level of academic literacy, is a goal that could subsume all other recommendations for enhancing the first year in Scottish HE.

## 7 Final recommendations

By choosing to commission reports on particular aspects of the first year in HE, the Enhancement Theme has directed the sector's attention to areas for enhancement. Overall, institutions are recommended to consider their current arrangements in the first year for transition, peer support, formative assessment, PDP, personalisation, scholarship skills and curriculum design. Each of the individual reports contains detailed recommendations for enhancement of the student experience. However, in acknowledgement of the fact that many of the detailed recommendations overlap, it is also recommended that institutions - and policy makers across the sector - conduct a debate at the level of the fundamental concepts of engagement and empowerment of learners. The Enhancement Theme has focused its own deliberations around these concepts and has concluded with the list of issues presented above as 'challenges'. To cast these in the form of high-level enhancement recommendations, we arrive finally at the following list:

- produce an explicit strategy for the first year
- shift resources into an increased provision for the first year
- improve the quality of the data about the first-year experience
- raise the status of first-year teaching
- define the overarching learning outcome of the first year as 'academic literacy'.

## 8 Appendix

### Quality Enhancement Themes First Year Experience reports

#### **Sector-wide discussion projects:**

Gordon, G (2008) *Sector-wide discussion: the nature and purposes of the first year*

Kochanowska, R and Johnston, W (2008) *Student expectations, experiences and reflections on the first year*

#### **Practice-focused development projects:**

Bovill, C, Morss, K and Bulley, C (2008) *Curriculum design for the first year*

Nicol, D (2008) *Transforming assessment and feedback: enhancing integration and empowerment in the first year*

Black, FM and MacKenzie, J (2008) *Peer support in the first year*

Miller, K, Calder, C, Martin, A, McIntyre, M, Pottinger, I and Smyth, G (2008) *Personal Development Planning in the first year*

Knox, H and Wyper, J (2008) *Personalisation of the first year*

Alston, F, Gourlay, L, Sutherland, R and Thomson, K (2008) *Introducing scholarship skills: academic writing*

Whittaker, R (2008) *Transition to and during the first year*

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