# Quality Enhancement Themes: The First Year Experience

Sector-wide discussion: the nature and purposes of the first year

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Professor George Gordon

# 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)

- enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR), run by QAA Scotland (www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/ELIR)

- improved forms of public information about quality; guidance is provided by the SFC (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)

- 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).

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).

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.

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# Contents

# Acknowledgements

# Executive summary

The aims of this First Year Experience Enhancement Theme project were to support and inform discussions within and among Scottish higher education institutions (HEIs) about the nature and purposes of the first year and the status of first-year teaching in higher education (HE). Integral to the debate was a focus on ways of effectively engaging and empowering first-year students. A parallel sector-wide discussion project explored 'Student expectations, experiences and reflections on the first year'.

Additionally, seven First Year Experience practice-focused development projects addressed curriculum design, transforming assessment, peer support, personal development planning (PDP), personalisation, scholarship skills and transition.

In addition to the reports of each project (listed in the Appendix), an overview document for the Theme has been commissioned.

The material for this report was gathered between October 2006 and August 2007. Key sources of data were discussions with main institutional contacts, visits to approximately half of the Scottish HEIs, and analysis of the reports that institutional contacts submitted in July and August 2007. This information was supplemented by a detailed study of developments in Hong Kong HE, targeted analyses of Australian and American experiences, extracts from relevant work by the Higher Education Academy (HEA), and selected examples of initiatives in English HEIs.

Key messages that emerged included the following:

- Context is important, possibly vital. On several occasions institutional contacts observed that one size does not fit all - and, by implication, should not be expected to. Detailed differences and nuances matter to institutions, and to their respective academic and support constituencies. This does not mean that similarities do not exist or that generalisations cannot be made, but it suggests that allowances must always be made for distinctive dimensions and features.

- Usage and interpretation of terminology, and strategic and operational responses differ across and within systems. In other words, it can be dangerous to presume over-precise commonality of interpretations, definitions and understandings. Frequently, fuller understanding requires careful and close contextualisation.

- In Scotland and in many other HE systems, notwithstanding a long heritage of initiatives, there is currently considerable interest in more fully understanding and enhancing students' experience of the first year.

- It was reassuring that many of the institutional reports looked forward to receiving the findings of the various projects in this Enhancement Theme and using them to inform internal initiatives, discussions and strategies.

- In aggregate, the material reported by Scottish HEIs demonstrated a substantial range of activities, initiatives, debates and strategies. The most common topics included enhancement to induction, orientation, strategies for engagement, implementation of personal professional development for students, enhanced provision of peer support and better systems for monitoring students. All these

topics echoed national, and often international, trends and developments. Some demonstrated adoption and adaptation of initiatives from other Scottish HEIs or from institutions outside of Scotland.

- Nevertheless, there were suggestions that champions, managers and practitioners approached adoption cautiously, reflecting carefully on the apparent appropriateness for their needs and situation.

- The prevalent tenor of discussions and feedback from Scottish HEIs was that attention was being given to various dimensions of engagement and empowerment. All institutions viewed engagement and empowerment as core dimensions for a successful student experience, even though the specific manifestations varied. Some institutions were discussing ways of motivating students to achieve higher levels of attainment. Probably all institutions were focusing on cultivating effective approaches to study and learning and building an attachment to, and understanding of, students' chosen major(s). Many initiatives aimed to enhance effective transition and the development of key academic skills for survival and growth. However, the balance between survival and growth varied among institutions, apparently related to the extent to which retention was perceived as a pressing issue.

- Art schools in Scotland have arranged meetings to share experiences and progress common interests. Other groups of Scottish HEIs might usefully adopt this initiative.

- The literature has tended to focus on concepts, topics, issues and policies or on institutional strategies and initiatives. By contrast, only a limited amount of discipline-specific material is widely available. For this reason, illustrative examples from the work of the HEA Subject Centres may be of particular use at various scales. This project did not investigate the availability of materials produced by professional bodies and associations, although it is known that at least some exist, such as the PDP materials that the Royal Society of Chemistry has produced for use by undergraduate chemistry students.

Points relating to the status of first-year teaching:

- There are concerns within Scottish HEIs and elsewhere about the status of first-year teaching. Strategies include national awards (England and Australia), changes to promotion criteria (Scotland and elsewhere), developmental fellowships (Scotland and elsewhere) and inventive ways of capturing the interest of senior research-active staff in first-year students' projects (for example, University of Abertay Dundee).

- Debates are taking place within institutions and elsewhere. One strategy, for example in Life Sciences at the University of Dundee, is to dedicate individuals with an interest and expertise in teaching first years to that task. In this example it coincides with individuals who have been primarily allocated teaching-focused roles. The perceived advantages are that they devote considerable time and energy to the task, to the benefit of students (as judged by exam results).

- The topic of the status of teaching in HE had recent airings and articulation when UK HEIs developed revised criteria for defining points and placing each academic within a new salary framework. Even where teaching-focused roles were identified as a subgroup of the academic 'family', it does not appear that roles in relation to the first year were distinguished as a specific subset. However, that does not necessarily preclude such articulations as the scheme becomes embedded and matures.

- Art schools reported that teaching was highly valued as a role, and therefore there were not significant issues over the status of the teaching of first-year students.

- One complicating feature of the status of first-year teaching is that it overlaps substantially with the broader topic of the status of teaching in HE in relation to that of research, both in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK. The HEA has placed this broader topic on the agenda by signalling a forthcoming study on criteria for promotion, based on teaching excellence and innovativeness. It will be interesting to see if that study attaches specific attention to the issue of the first year, which a range of studies have identified as one crucial point of transition for students.

- One course of action would be to facilitate, as part of the engagement and dissemination work from this Enhancement Theme, discussions with and among relevant senior managers in Scottish HEIs on concerns about and approaches to issues surrounding the status of first-year teaching.

Areas for further consideration:

- The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) might usefully dedicate a stream of ongoing funding to the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme, perhaps for an additional period of two to three years. Specifically, this could enable institutions to progress and extend the relevant policy and practice debates and organisational cycles, taking on board (as appropriate) lessons from the current projects, reflecting on issues raised, developing adaptations of initiatives that have operated successfully elsewhere, and refining and/or revising their own practices, polices and strategies. Some developmental funding could be given to institutions and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Scotland office, under the guidance of a steering committee, to enable continuing support and, ideally, permit some additional targeted investigations. For example, given the importance attached to formative feedback by students in the National Student Survey, efforts should be made to maximise the use of the outputs from the transforming assessment project in this Theme.

- The Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC), in its review of Enhancement Themes, might consider the possibility that some Themes could extend over longer periods, entailing cycles of investigation, reflection, reporting, further reflection, and action planning and implementation. SHEEC could also seek ways of further strengthening connectivity among Themes. As outlined in the concluding remarks of this report, questions have emerged from this project that could usefully be explored.

- The work on this Enhancement Theme has been quite distinctive. Arguably, no comparable system-wide discussion has been initiated on the theme of the first-year experience. Consequently, the outputs could be of considerable interest to others, and efforts should be made to lubricate a broad strategy of disseminating the work. In addition to publishing the project reports, the opportunity should be taken to facilitate presentations at national and international events. That would presumably entail discussions between the QAA Scotland office and the SFC. Extension work should take place to strengthen networks and collaborations, possibly prioritising European links.

- In a similar vein, it would be desirable to maintain a website on which resources and updated reports could be lodged. Organising an online conference should be considered as an additional activity. Likewise, attention should be paid to greater links between the Enhancement Themes and HEA websites.

- Institutions will wish to draw from this and the other reports from this Theme to inform internal discussions, debates and developments. It is for them to elect how to do this. Nonetheless, there would appear to be merits in considering team-based approaches, including selected opportunities for action-oriented meetings of inter-institutional teams, possibly grouped by similarity of academic profile and/or mission. Further opportunities should be provided to share experiences and reflect on practices.

- Students, perhaps facilitated by student participation in quality scotland (sparqs), should consider how they can develop an agenda for action arising from this report. That might fruitfully be set alongside the action agenda they define from the output of the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme project on 'Student expectations, experiences and reflections on the first year'.

- Likewise, institutions may find it sensible to consider this report and that on student expectations, experiences and reflections in tandem.

- Many of the issues and themes that emerged from the reports and discussions with respondents interweaved with dimensions of staff and educational development. Indeed, as one would anticipate, staff and educational developers frequently played key roles in supporting, informing and facilitating initiatives or associated agendas. The range of actions was impressive and included the development (at Heriot-Watt) of an audit tool for use by faculties, departments and other units; staff-student dialogues (for example, University of Edinburgh); and Enhancement Theme-related seminars and conferences (for example, Scottish Agricultural College; Universities of Dundee, Strathclyde and Stirling; Glasgow School of Art; Edinburgh College of Art; The Robert Gordon University). Educational developers were also prominent players in related cross-institutional committees and working groups.

- Many institutional respondents reported encouraging levels of staff engagement with developmental activities related to the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme, and anticipated that this would continue in the post-report phase of the Theme. They also signalled a commitment to using the outputs to inform developmental actions and strategic dialogues. Locally, staff and educational developers are often central facilitators, working in partnership with others and strategically steered by the relevant senior officer and/or university committee. Collectively, these players are developing action plans to enable institutional aspirations to be progressed. Further areas for consideration may stem from the issues and questions raised in the concluding remarks of this report. In conjunction with academic leaders, educational developers could facilitate such discussions within institutions.

- Emerging agendas are likely to impinge on such discussions. For example, discussions are being held on ways of progressing the proposals contained in the Leitch report (HM Treasury, 2006). In the context of this Theme, the central issue would be how any actions and developments arising from the implementation of that report would influence the nature and purposes of the first year. Thus the looping developmental cycles envisioned by Krause (2007a) would be likely to play out against the implications of shifting agendas, priorities and pressures.

- An overview document for the First Year Theme has been commissioned. It will distil international illustrations of interesting practices, policies and structures relating to the first-year experience.

- Finally, readers are encouraged to refer to the wealth of valuable information presented in the outputs of the other projects associated with this Theme. Each should be of considerable relevance to policy-makers, institutional managers, students and staff. They should provide important sources of inputs to debates over policies and practices and offer pointers to good practice and to areas that require further consideration and investigation.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Aims

The aims of this project were to support discussions within and among Scottish HEIs about the nature and purposes of the first year and the status of first-year teaching in HE. Integral to the debate was attention to ways of effectively engaging and empowering first-year students through, for example, skills and identity development.

## 1.2 Programme of work

The programme of work included:

- conversations with each Scottish HEI via their main institutional contact, visits to several institutions, and analysis of institutional reports on the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme
- a selective worldwide search for examples of interesting developments, and follow-up conversations with key contacts
- detailed interviews with five HEIs in Hong Kong and with the University Grants Committee of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
- dialogues with the steering committee and other project directors
- reference to the ever-increasing published literature
- the production of two briefing papers and a report on the project's findings
- contributions to sessions and workshops at the Enhancement Themes Conference at Heriot-Watt University, 8-9 March 2007
- inputs from a number of HEA Subject Centres
- presentation and discussions at the 20th International First-Year Experience Conference, Hawaii, 9-12 July 2007.

## 1.3 Context for the work

The material that informs this report was gathered between October 2006 and August 2007. Much of it is of recent origin. However, many facets of the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme are not new concepts or challenges per se. For example, Harvey, Drew and Smith (2006) decided to extend the coverage in their literature survey back to the 1960s because they concluded, notwithstanding many changes that have subsequently affected HE worldwide, that there were studies and findings that remained of interest.

Likewise, many HEIs continue to have practices and policies that still bear familial links to those which usefully served earlier generations of students - for example, advisors of studies, personal tutors, concepts of communities of learners, and introduction to and acculturation into the mores and practices of HE. In similar vein, earlier curricular structures and options in Scottish universities told of prevailing views about the nature and purposes of HE, and the place in that design occupied by the first year.

Even debates over the status of teaching first-year students date back decades, if not further. At the 2007 Enhancement Themes conference, some delegates recollected with affection the tradition in the 1950s and early 1960s - especially in arts, humanities and social science in Scottish universities - for the professor to give all or most of the first-year course. In hindsight this was seen both as an important symbol and as an opportunity for students to meet and be inspired by the academic leader of the department, and for that individual to seek to meet the new students and influence their approach to the discipline.

However, the many changes that have affected HE since the 1950s have significantly reframed the topic of the first year - as evidenced by the burgeoning literature and the range of initiatives and strategies. It is not surprising, therefore, that one outcome of consultations with the HE sector in Scotland was that the first year was identified as a priority for attention via an Enhancement Theme. Aspects of the topic had been covered in earlier themes, notably in Responding to Student Needs, and in the enhancement-associated work on effective learning. But the view emerged that it would be timely to concentrate on the nature and purposes of the first year, with particular attention to issues of student engagement and empowerment.

## 1.4    Structure of the report

This report on the nature and purposes of the first year summarises the outcome of associated institutional discussions and actions in Scotland and presents supporting evidence from elsewhere. The student viewpoint is captured in the report of the sector-wide discussion project 'Student expectations, experiences and reflections on the first year'. The dimensions of curriculum design, transforming assessment, peer support, personal development planning (PDP), personalisation, scholarship skills and transition are discussed and explicated in the respective reports of these practice-focused development projects.

Section 2 distils some of the actions and reflections taking place within Scottish HEIs in relation to the first year. In addition to the wealth of material, recurrent messages were that HEIs welcomed the opportunity to review, reflect and disseminate, and were looking forward to receiving the various reports from the Theme and using them as an additional input to their ongoing strategic and operational discussions.

Sections 3 to 7 highlight some related developments elsewhere, featuring materials from the HEA, illustrations of approaches in England, developments in Hong Kong, and Australian and American experiences respectively. Finally, Section 8 identifies some key points from the project findings and makes suggestions for further action.

The list of selected references includes recent literature surveys and overviews that, in turn, contain exhaustive references. Those detailed lists are not reproduced here. Websites are mentioned within the specific sections of this report.

The materials surveyed in the project (as do others) depends heavily on evidence from publications written in English. While that permitted access to studies and reports from many countries, the coverage is not comprehensive. Similar gaps occur in terms of attendance by delegates from certain countries at the various international conferences on the first-year experience. Rectifying such potential omissions in coverage was beyond the scope of this study.

# 2  The Scottish scene

The material presented below is distilled from institutional reports and/or discussions with institutional contacts. It is comprehensive in the sense that all Scottish HEIs are featured. However, it is not comprehensive - and nor could it realistically aspire to be so - in terms of covering all issues and initiatives in Scottish HEIs related to the first year. Generally, institutions did not recount well-established practices or explore progressive enhancements already made to many of these. Rather, they focused on their current agenda and how it related to and demonstrated action supporting the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme.

Since context emerged as a common dimension in most responses, the following highlight summaries of institutional actions, dialogues and issues are grouped under the broadly recognised categories of:

- the ancient universities
- pre-1992 universities
- post-1992 universities
- post-1992 HEIs
- specialist institutions.

The section then concludes with some overarching points and observations.

## 2.1   The ancient universities

### 2.1.1   University of St Andrews

In 2006, the university commissioned an external study of staff and student perceptions on issues relating to the first year. The resulting Meagher report was subsequently discussed in various internal forums. It was supplemented by analysis carried out by St Andrews Learning and Teaching Innovation, Review and Enhancement (SALTIRE, a developmental unit within the university) of the first survey on the first year, conducted in 2005-06.

Collectively, the information from the Meagher report, the SALTIRE analysis and subsequent discussions within the university resulted in the identification of seven key first-year priorities:

- ways of increasing the level of challenge and of further promoting active learning
- increasing the exposure of students to research environments and experiences and real-life applications as a means of promoting motivation and deep learning
- devising ways of affording greater recognition for success in the first year
- more disciplinary involvement in induction
- implementing, alongside the introduction of student PDP, a new scheme for personal tutoring

- further encouragement of co-curricular involvement to support a holistic view of student engagement

- exploration of opportunities to promote engagement with a broader range of disciplines in the first year.

Progress has been made on all these priorities, in some cases assisted by targeted innovation grants. Initial support for raising the threshold for entry to the second year encountered arguments that some students may need a little time to settle into their studies. Work has progressed on ways of actively engaging students in their learning. In 2007-08, several schools are introducing a new Module Management System to enhance monitoring of student performance.

The university has approved the introduction, from 2007-08, of a Deans' list as a means of recognising and rewarding high-performing first-year students. In a similar vein, the university is considering using a supplementary transcript to recognise selected co-curricular activities. These might include representational roles, summer internships and leadership roles in student societies.

While the Meagher report argued in favour of greater multidisciplinary provision in the first year, the position that has emerged from subsequent discussions and consultations is more permissive. It entails the production of a list of multidisciplinary modules, or modules easily accessible to students of other disciplines.

### 2.1.2  University of Aberdeen

The university, building on internal discussions, was intending in 2007-08 to:

- introduce an enhanced orientation programme

- review advising processes as part of a strategy of enhancing pastoral support

- investigate ways of raising student awareness of available university support agencies.

Two drivers were highlighted: retention and student feedback. In relation to the latter, the university undertook a survey of new entrants in 2005-06. Key messages for enhancement were that students:

- wanted extra meetings with their advisor of studies

- sought additional induction to specific services and facilities

- found some difficulty in navigating the campus

- would have appreciated additional pre-entry study-skills advice.

Some overlap occurred in terms of learning points from Aberdeen's returns to the International Student Barometer. Here, various dimensions of enhanced induction and orientation featured prominently.

During 2006-07, actions taken in relation to the above issues included:

- a first-year focus group (of 41 students), which met twice per semester under the convenorship of the Vice-Principal (Learning and Teaching)

- a Retention Day, in January 2007, attended by 36 staff from across the institution and a representative of the students' association
- a meeting of senior advisors of study, chaired by the Vice-Principal (Learning and Teaching), focusing on ways in which 'at-risk' students might receive additional support from advisors
- the production of an online student help guide
- various supportive activities and initiatives in the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Programme run by the Centre for Learning and Teaching
- planning for a workshop series on the first year to begin in October 2007, focusing on practical solutions to first-year issues (this arose from the deliberations of a consultative reference group of students and cross-college representatives, which met in April 2007)
- a follow-up survey to address the whole first-year student experience
- discussions between the Vice-Principal and heads of college on retention issues, which led to action plans in March 2007.

These processes of analysis, dialogue and reflection enabled the university to articulate the following broad views on the purposes of the first year to:

- provide effective, thorough and ongoing academic and non-academic induction to university life
- promote targeted support
- use formative feedback to enable students to develop their awareness of their progress
- integrate the student PDP e-portfolio as a means of encouraging students to become autonomous reflective learners.

In a similar vein, the university wants students to:

- develop a sense of belonging to their discipline area(s) and the institution
- make a successful transition to university study
- be intellectually excited and motivated to develop
- develop study-related generic skills
- develop a sense of self-responsibility and lay the foundations for autonomous learning.

Specific transition-related actions have included:

- piloting, in autumn 2007, pre-sessional induction in four social science disciplines using a dedicated WebCT (course tools) site
- revising learning resources and making them available to all students through a WebCT site
- rolling out a buddy scheme previously used with further education (FE) entrants to other cohorts of students, including summer school access students
- identifying ways of enhancing support for international students

- implementing, in autumn 2007, a range of enhancements to pre-entry inductions and freshers' week activities.

Additionally, heads of college have been considering possible enhancement of the academic advising system.

Included in the agenda for future action were:

- ways of improving communication, especially with 'at-risk' students
- undertaking, in 2007-08, a curricular review incorporating lessons, concepts and themes from the current work on the first year
- increased targeting of support
- learning from a recently commissioned study investigating what characteristics and factors may make students of the university more likely to withdraw.

2.1.3   University of Glasgow

The main institutional contact had convened a network of nine experienced staff to discuss various dimensions of the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme. To date, this network has met on five occasions and has progressed various initiatives. Its work has embraced deliberations on:

- the curriculum
- staff and student expectations
- student engagement
- student empowerment.

Regarding the curriculum, conversations with colleagues, including the university's Retention Working Group, resulted in the network deciding that it was appropriate for the detailed academic experience of students to be shaped by their specific programme of study.

To inform discussions on expectations, a sample survey of staff views was carried out in early summer 2007, with the intention of supplementing this information through a series of focus groups. The staff survey had sections on staff's expectations of students' capabilities in relation to various skills and tasks; views on the appropriateness of various approaches to learning and teaching; aspects of assessment and feedback; and what is done to empower first-year students. An opportunity was given to recount success stories and indicate desired changes.

In parallel, the university also commissioned an internal first-year experience student survey, which attracted a 16 per cent response rate. Reassuringly, most students considered that the first year helped them to develop the skills that the staff survey had highlighted as crucial - for example, critical analysis, problem solving, being a team player, written communication, oral communication and work planning.

The Retention Working Group, established in April 2006, identified mathematical skills as an area requiring additional attention. As a consequence, the university has decided to establish a cross-faculty support unit for numeracy and basic mathematics, building on

successful ventures in some other HEIs. The Retention Working Group has also been exploring ways of achieving higher levels of social engagement, especially in large first-year classes, and improvements to induction.

Many points of detail that emerged from the two surveys have featured in continuing discussions in the university. One such illustration is an exploration of how desired key student skills are explicitly developed within the curriculum. A specific initiative, the Student Network (a Moodle-enabled approach[1]) is described in a case study in the report of the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme development project on peer support.

2.1.4  University of Edinburgh

Considerable academic responsibility is devolved to the three colleges (Humanities and Social Science; Medicine and Veterinary Medicine; Science and Engineering). In recognition of this, first-year initiatives have been progressed at two levels: college discussions linked to college learning and teaching strategies, and aspects addressed on a university-wide basis.

In Science and Engineering, 12 'vanguard' courses have been targeted; these courses are designed to promote responsible learning. Developmental discussions have involved course teams, sometimes in collaboration with e-learning and educational development staff. Humanities and Social Science has focused on a review of induction. In Medicine and Veterinary Medicine, the learning and teaching strategy is based on six principles, the second of which - on student-centred learning - links most closely to the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme.

University-wide events have included the following:

- an event for course organisers in May 2007, focusing on the challenge of first-year courses; a series of short papers addressed engaging and empowering the learners on these courses
- drawing on inputs from Edinburgh University Students' Association (EUSA) about the importance of feedback; in February 2007, the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Assessment and EUSA organised a joint event for staff and students on enhancing feedback
- discussions on the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme in the Postgraduate Certificate in University Teaching.

From the various discussions, emerging pan-institutional themes surround:

- ways of aligning student and institutional perspectives and expectations
- exploring what students should get from their first year
- making best use of opportunities to engage and empower students.

Suggestions in relation to the third of these points have included:

- responding to students' interests when designing courses

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[1] Moodle is an open-source e-learning platform (www.moodle.org).

- enhancing alignment between courses and programmes of study
- staging transitions carefully
- enhancing the coordination and support of teaching staff in large first-year courses
- fostering a sense of integration within academic communities
- maximising opportunities for early formative feedback
- supporting collaborative learning
- providing opportunities for students to reflect on their learning.

## 2.2 Pre-1992 universities

### 2.2.1 University of Dundee

The university has progressed work on the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme by building on existing initiatives, for example in relation to further enhancement of student PDP and various facets of student support, and through a series of events and discussions planned to run until at least May 2008. Examples of events include:

- good practice in working with international students, June 2007
- focusing on the first-year experience as the topic for the 2007 Annual Academic Professional Development Conference, June 2007
- a quality enhancement conference on personalisation in undergraduate teaching, September 2007.

Dundee also hosted an event in May 2007 run by the Student PDP Quality Enhancement project team.

Additionally, Dundee University Students' Association (DUSA), in collaboration with the Director of Quality Assurance, has held focus groups to explore student expectations and views on transition, student engagement with academic and career-related support and with DUSA facilities and activities, and on assessment and feedback. DUSA has also organised a wider survey of the first-year experience. Potential action points from this survey will be discussed by the university's Learning and Teaching Committee.

The Learning and Teaching Committee is the main focus of ongoing discussions related to the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme, and this structure is mirrored in the three colleges. Curricular matters are discussed in these forums. The College of Life Sciences provides an illustration, where attention has centred on ways in which the first year integrates with later stages of the curriculum. Discussions on the implications of the Research-Teaching Linkages Enhancement Theme also feature in these developmental discussions.

The First Year Experience Enhancement Theme will be a topic in the workshop programme for the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education. The university is also developing a master's-level continuing professional development (CPD) module on Transitions: Developing Effective Relationships between Educational Sectors. It is anticipated that the Theme's outputs will inform the curriculum for this module.

### 2.2.2 University of Stirling

The university operates a flexible modular structure. This may in large measure explain the fact that around half of the student cohort graduates in a different subject from the one nominated at entry. It may also be closely linked to the university's high rates of progression.

The university restructured in 2006, from four faculties to 19 departments. Each department has a director of learning and teaching. Working with the heads of department, these directors have responsibility for leading, supporting and embedding quality enhancement at departmental level.

Specific actions in support of the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme have been:

● presentation of a paper at the 19th International First-Year Experience Conference in Toronto (July 2006) and the Second European First-Year Conference in Gothenburg (May 2007)

● early discussions in the Quality Enhancement Committee on the first year at Stirling, supported by subsequent discussions at departmental learning and teaching committees

● university discussions about the first-year experience, informed by contributions from an American expert on the first-year experience and the Chair of the Steering Committee of the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme

● a meeting between academic and support staff and Kerri-Lee Krause in her advisory role on the Theme

● an internal event on the impact of changes in compulsory Scottish schooling, particularly in relation to digital technologies and likely implications for the first-year intake to the university

● implementation, in November 2006, of student PDP facilities for first-year students

● a review and enhancement of induction and welcome procedures to help students, among other things, to settle in more quickly

● benchmarking the experiences of international students with the aim of improving their experiences.

Additional actions and investigations have included:

● some departments establishing first-year tutors/advisors of study

● some departments deciding to dedicate more experienced staff to teaching first-year modules

● targeted proposals being developed to enhance support for learning and social orientation for first-year international students

● agreement to develop, as a means of accessing richer data, a competition based on student submissions on the first-year experience

● exploration of the potential of peer mentoring (peer-assisted study schemes), with the expectation of piloting a scheme in some departments prior to wider adoption

- discussion on introducing some specific first-year modules (generic or discipline-specific); this may also involve developing some interdisciplinary modules
- consideration of establishing a working group on the first year to coordinate and progress developments
- initial discussions on ways of using student residences as the base for living-learning communities
- consideration of further harnessing of the possibilities offered by new technologies for enhancing and supporting active, collaborative learning and prompting student engagement and empowerment.

### 2.2.3 The Open University in Scotland

The Open University (OU) has a long tradition of conducting research into the experiences of its students. A major aspect of OU work associated with this Enhancement Theme has been a review of the literature on the first-year experience of open and distance-learning students, along with evaluations and reports by members of the OU in Scotland Learning Development Team. Examples of the latter include:

- Cannell, P, (2007) *Recruit and Retain: A Summary of the OU in Scotland Social Science Peer Mentoring Project*
- Cannell, P, and Thomson, A, (2007) *An Evaluation of an Induction Toolkit for Students making the transition from college to the OU in Scotland.*

In July 2007, Susan Levy of the Learning Development Team summarised the key messages from the literature review, which was organised under the headings of induction, retention, academic and social integration, and teaching and learning. These key messages were that:

- students value early proactive contact
- a welcome call raises confidence
- students can suffer from information overload
- early access to the student website (Student Home) helps to generate a sense of connection and engagement
- knowing someone who has successfully completed the course, or having previous experience of studying in HE, can be helpful
- students struggle to find time and space for study
- many students are worried about their study skills, although time and space often prove more significant challenges
- clarifying and effectively communicating available coordinating support continues to be a challenge.

### 2.2.4 Heriot-Watt University

For some time the university has actively pursued a range of strategies to smooth transition into the first year (for example, bridging courses for entry into science and engineering programmes). A major new initiative, designed by the Educational Development Unit, is a first-year experience planning tool that departments and other

areas can use to review practice and identify areas for improvement. The planning tool has seven sections dealing with:

- before entry
- between application and enrolment
- in registration/freshers' week
- through mentoring and support
- through the first-year curriculum
- through the student learning experience
- through student feedback.

The planning tool had a supporting briefing paper with suggestions for improving induction, comments on socialisation into academia and a set of related questions that could be used with students, and advice on steps that should aid retention. There were also four short case studies, on a retention pilot project, an absent international student, challenges for an international student in settling into a different country and set of environments, and the concerns of a non-traditional student. This short briefing paper could be used by departments and service and programme teams, or as a resource for a staff development workshop.

A significant driver in the decision to shift to a semester structure was the desire to enhance approaches to teaching and the learning experience of students. The planning toolkit is an example of supportive actions.

Each of Heriot-Watt's three schools is also progressing appropriate initiatives and actions. For example, the School of Engineering and Physical Sciences is conducting a survey of students who appear to be encountering academic problems. The School intends to act on the findings from the survey.

Life Sciences has implemented several actions aimed at improving rates of progression. For example, an additional biological skills module has been introduced. In conjunction with the existing one it means that Life Sciences students can pursue a range of skills (for example, scientific writing and literature, and information technology (IT) in the context of biology). One member of staff is dedicated to this task, supported by a system of personal tutors drawn from the particular biological degree the student plans to study. These modules are also linked to student PDP.

To enable new students to understand the meaning of plagiarism, the School of Management and Languages requires them to submit a software analysis using Turnitin along with each assignment.

The Students' Association has held focus groups to gather student opinion on the first-year experience. Its report will inform subsequent discussions and actions.

2.2.5   University of Strathclyde

Early work on retention (2001-03) involved research into the student experience at the university and subsequent review of practice in the five faculties.

In 2006, Senate adopted a first-year action plan. It detailed objectives, responsibilities, timescales and performance indicators covering management, transition, student engagement and resources. A supporting paper on transition identified four key developmental dimensions for effective transition:

- explicitness and visibility
- engagement and activity
- evaluation and change
- transformation of the learning environment.

Consequential work has included:

- progressing a more consistent approach across the university
- engaging with the academic community through, for example, dedicated Learning Enhancement Network seminars and day conferences
- new initiatives within each faculty.

The university has favoured routing this work through existing committee structures - specifically the Academic Committee, which is chaired by the Deputy Principal (Learning and Teaching) and includes student representatives and the relevant vice-dean from each faculty.

At faculty level, responsibility rests with either a corresponding committee or a first-year group. Illustrations of faculty actions include the following:

- Student mentors have been introduced in Law, Arts and Social Sciences in the 2007-08 freshers' week programme as a step in promoting social and academic engagement.
- Strathclyde Business School (SBS) uses an established core component of the first-year curriculum, the Management Development Programme. This features as a case study in the report on the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme development project on transition.
- SBS is also introducing a questionnaire to access students' views and behaviours, for example on their use of time and on various dimensions of engagement.
- In Engineering, the departments use student feedback as an input to policy debates and have adopted successful practice from other areas of the Faculty. Two research projects are in progress - on retention and on the interface between schools and universities; the latter is funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council.
- In Science, attention has focused for several years on more effective induction, improved attendance and monitoring. Additionally, first-year initiatives have been reported in recent departmental reviews.
- A set of values have been articulated in Education to guide practice, backed by a thorough system of recording, monitoring and reporting on key dimensions of the first year.

## 2.3   Post-1992 universities

### 2.3.1   University of Abertay Dundee

The university has a range of initiatives, operating on a variety of scales.

A localised example has been work within the School of Sciences on student workloads. Two years ago, there was widespread revision to the curriculum and pedagogical approach in the fields of Computing and Technology. An important driver for change was the desire to seek higher levels of student engagement. One aspect of the revised structure is that students now have fortnightly structured tutorials directly linked to first-year programme learning objectives. They are also expected to maintain a portfolio of their work, which is subject to a viva as a prerequisite of progression to the second year. The School has also implemented enhanced student monitoring via its Director of Operations. A further component is a direct link with student PDP (entitled SELF at Abertay).

A broader strategy, White Space, is seeking to develop critical thinkers, flexible collaborators, determined creators and graduates who can handle challenging complexities. An initial series of workshops clarified shared understandings of the White Space graduate profile. These were subsequently explored and further articulated through a second series of workshops aimed at allowing staff to discuss how to design and support a learning experience that would enable development of the skills and attitudes embodied in the profile. The White Space project is not specifically directed at the first year, although it covers Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level 7 (first year) and some schools have commenced specific actions related to SCQF level 7.

A further initiative interweaves several related goals such as active learning, project/ teamwork and authentic learning experiences. Students undertake a module over two semesters in which they work in teams on real-life projects. In 2005-06, computing and technology students in teams of four or five had the challenge of developing a new mobile phone game. The culmination was a presentational pitch to seek business approval.

The university is anticipating adoption of this initiative in 2007-08 by programmes in other schools. The initiative encourages motivation, skills embedding, collaborative learning and confidence building. It has also proved to be an effective means of engaging senior research-oriented academics in a project supervisory role.

An annual quality enhancement conference was introduced in 2005-06, with the aim of celebrating good work within the university. It has attracted significantly greater staff involvement than the preceding seminar series.

Three years ago, the university successfully developed a Student Academic Support Unit. This Unit is specifically intended to assist first-year students adapt to academic life.

The university also has a Student Experience Coordinator who works closely with the Students' Association to progress ways of enabling the student voice to be heard, including the views of first-year students.

In 2006-07, the university's induction process, and thus many of the first-year students, had the opportunity to benefit from the expertise of a Dundee-based global company.

The company supplied an attitude and aptitude questionnaire, which students completed during induction. It also trained mentors on how to use profiles generated from analysis of the data in subsequent developmental discussions with students. Some 40-50 per cent of students completed the questionnaire. The university planned to repeat and extend this venture in 2007-08.

### 2.3.2   Glasgow Caledonian University

Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) has been actively addressing several key first-year dimensions for some time. It has implemented tracking and monitoring procedures and disseminated early findings, internally and externally. This work at GCU has directly prompted other Scottish HEIs to pursue equivalent strategies. Likewise, the work of Elaine Smith on the Responding to Student Needs Enhancement Theme, for example, to facilitate engagement of first-year engineering students with their studies is being promulgated more widely via the HEA Engineering Subject Centre (see www.engsc.ac.uk).

On a broader scale, in 2006-07, the university launched the Caledonian Academy. This is an institution-wide strategy to develop powerful academic learning communities and practitioner networks aligned to key objectives of the university's learning, teaching and assessment strategy. The work spans all aspects and years of learning, but given the strong institutional emphasis on progression, retention and engagement, considerable interest centres on the first year.

One strand of the initiative is the Caledonian Academy Learning Communities Forum. Part of the work of the Forum at GCU involves contributions from external speakers. For example, in September 2007, a visitor from Murdoch University, Australia, presented at a seminar on the topic of 'Student and staff perceptions of web-based lecture recording technologies'. The research derived from a collaborative project at Murdoch, Macquarie, Flinders and Newcastle Universities in Australia, funded by the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. Surveys of students revealed interesting differences between students of generation Y (born after 1979) and generation X (born between 1960 and 1979), and between on-campus and distance learners. GCU is seeking to learn from such research to inform the development of ways of more effectively using new technologies in a variety of learning contexts and for a range of student cohorts.

In parallel to the above initiative, GCU is establishing a First-Year Community of Practice. This is a forum specifically directed at enabling grounded sharing of, and reflection upon, experiences, innovations and issues around the first year of study. The Community of Practice initially involved a small number of nominees from each of the eight Schools in the university. Subsequently, topics have been discussed in small groups, plenaries and online moderated forums. Among the points emerging from initial discussions were that:

- mentoring was widely supported as a potentially effective practice
- induction information needs clearer targeting
- induction should be spread over a longer period
- in order to be effective, engagement needs to happen at several levels.

The Community of Practice is generating an agenda of points for further discussion and exploration as well as possible solutions for some challenges, which could be explored in greater detail.

### 2.3.3   Napier University

Building on established initiatives, including the work of the Student Retention Group, the university has additionally focused attention on several, often interlinked, developmental strands and actions.

In preparation for the implementation of student PDP in 2007-08, a website and an e-portfolio tool were developed, along with associated training provision. In parallel, a structure of personal development tutors has been created.

One School has piloted an automated attendance monitoring system with first-year students. The evaluation indicated a need to simplify the system.

In 2006-07, a programme of personal development for students, Confident Futures, was piloted with 600 first-year students. The intention is to extend the coverage to all first-year students over the next three years (see www.napier.ac.uk/confidentfutures).

The university has formed a Student Experience Committee as an advisory committee to the Principal. While it covers all years, the first year is an important component of the work of this committee.

Napier University led the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme development project on scholarship skills. The outputs have been incorporated into a handbook and will be embedded in a revised module.

In the 2008-09 session, the university moves from an 8x15 credit structure to a 6x20 version. Discussions have been taking place on implications for the first year. It has been agreed that from 2008 new arrangements will apply to the first week of each trimester, with induction being embedded in that time window.

Two other topics have been the subject of review, assessment and professional services. In both cases the expectation was to action outcomes in 2007-08. Both reviews closely focused on effectiveness and the key dimensions of the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme of engagement and empowerment.

Three staff development conferences have covered dimensions of the Theme. In June 2006, an event for teaching fellows addressed equipping new students to succeed. A conference in January 2007 dealt with the role of PDP in individualising the HE experience, while an event in June 2007 concentrated on assessment issues.

### 2.3.4   University of the West of Scotland

The university (formerly University of Paisley), which merged with Bell College in 2007 and was subsequently renamed, has established a cross-institutional (including representation from Bell College) first-year student experience working group, which reports to the Learning and Teaching Board. The group meets regularly, receives updates on initiatives and projects, discusses projects and developments, and considers recommendations to be conveyed to the Board.

Initiatives have included piloting a student monitoring system and a project to introduce a student buddy system for late applicants, who were identified as a subcohort that might benefit from additional support. Most of the 184 late applicants agreed to participate in the scheme. Mentees were allocated a student buddy, where possible from the same school. Buddies were interviewed, trained and paid for the task. Meetings between buddy and mentee were scheduled for weeks five, seven and 10, with mentees having the right to opt out of meetings. Full evaluation is ongoing, but in the light of generally positive feedback the decision has been taken to offer all first-year students the opportunity to have a buddy. The intention is to track student progression and performance.

The university has a welcome management group, which also reports to the Learning and Teaching Board. This group has four subgroups dealing respectively with:

- operational dimensions
- international students
- early engagement of students
- the student handbook.

In September 2006, the Learning and Teaching Conference highlighted the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme. All participants received a First Year Experience pack. A network of practitioners has also been set up, with membership from each school, and relevant service departments. The Theme development project 'Personalisation of the first year' was based at the University of the West of Scotland. Hazel Knox regularly reported on development to the first-year student experience working group and at other forums.

2.3.5   Queen Margaret University

Queen Margaret University (QMU) approached the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme through five main strands:

- student focus groups
- institutional discussions
- two good practice forums
- a good practice website
- ongoing work to improve coordination of the first-year experience and enhancement of pre-entry information and induction.

An external researcher was engaged to organise a series of focus groups with students, including a subset with first years. Two reports were produced, one focusing on issues raised by first-year students. That report is being considered by QMU's Educational Policy Committee.

The Centre for Academic Practice dedicated some staff development events to facets of the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme, such as online assessment and engaging first-year students in a large-class setting. In spring 2007, two good practice forums were held, at which QMU staff reported on their innovative practice. Follow-up may involve the HEA.

Also in spring 2007, a good practice website was launched as part of the QMU website. Here, staff can share and search for ideas used within the teaching and learning environments of QMU.

QMU has an established pan-institution transition and induction working group, which coordinates all pre-freshers' week and freshers' week activities. The group also organises the optional peer mentoring scheme for first-year students. A dedicated three-day pre-entry course is held for mature students.

In 2006-07, work continued on streamlining information supplied to students during induction, targeting of information, making greater use of online facilities such as interactive induction tutorials to the library services, and enhancing various student support websites.

Institutional discussions at QMU have covered two additional sets of activities. Firstly, conversations have been held within schools on aspects of learning with specific reference to the first year (for example, interprofessional learning in the School of Health Services). Secondly, as part of QMU's annual review and monitoring processes, schools are asked to report on good practice and specifically make links to the Enhancement Theme(s).

Finally, QMU's commitment to widening participation means that, in common with many Scottish HEIs, the university has developed initiatives dedicated to specific forms of transition, for example for students with disabilities, progression from FE and induction of international students.

2.3.6   The Robert Gordon University

The Robert Gordon University (RGU) has a first-year experience working group, which was formed in 2005. The group's remit is to:

- suggest ways of improving the first-year experience
- make recommendations for implementation and consideration
- ensure that national and international best practice informs RGU policy on the first-year experience.

Among the activities of the working group in 2006-07 were:

- using the Student Transition and Retention (STAR) audit tool across schools, with findings discussed at the 'Enhancing First Year @ RGU' conference
- commencing development of a first-year resource toolkit for staff
- implementing a first-year website for students
- piloting study skills
- promoting institution-wide discussion involving staff and students via the mechanisms of the 'Enhancing First Year @ RGU' conference and seven RGU project awards.

Conference participants (academic and support staff and students) took part in solution groups, which discussed social and academic integration and brainstormed possible solutions. The latter included:

- 'joined-up' progression into HE
- providing pre-entry students with a fuller picture of the student experience
- using learning communities to enhance peer and staff/student relationships
- developing relationships with students' significant others to strengthen that support mechanism
- enabling students to lead initiatives for students
- adapting the university experience to the needs of students, while recognising the complexity of that challenge
- making support services visible to students
- ensuring that teaching inspires and engages students
- staff development to progress enhancement.

The intention is to revisit these issues and solutions via the university's network of first-year practitioners and a virtual discussion forum.

A call for proposals for project awards was launched at the conference, and seven projects received funding support:

- 'So you want to be a nursing student?', which aims to produce a realistic DVD for potential nursing students.
- 'Using streamed video to enhance and provide alternative routes to learning regional autonomy'. This project in the School of Health Sciences will provide a package of online learning activities using Moodle.
- 'The enhancement and development of resources for stage 1 web-based digital media', which is focusing on enhancing the stage 1 pre-registration experiences of nursing and midwifery students.
- 'First-year PALS' (peer support), being piloted at Gray's School of Art. Particular attention is being paid to the use of contact via media such as mobile phones, MySpace and podcasts.
- 'Restructuring and redesigning the Computing Foundation year', with particular attention to the use of audio and video podcasts.
- Development of communication skills for undergraduate pharmacy students.
- Development of an Accounting and Finance Society.

Emerging messages from discussions within the institution include:

- There is no one single first-year experience, so strategies need to be multifaceted.
- Academic and social integration are vital dimensions.
- Communication underpins engagement and empowerment.
- The development of learning communities appears to offer an attractive option.
- Learning environments increasingly need to be flexible.
- Attention needs to be paid to what students want to get from their first year (see the outputs from the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme sector-wide discussion project on student expectations, experiences and reflections on the first year).

- The first year should provide a positive experience of HE.
- Students should feel valued as individuals.
- The development of close links between staff and students should be a two-way dialogue about expectations, experiences and development.

## 2.4    Post-1992 HEIs

### 2.4.1   Bell College

In August 2007, the College formally merged with the University of Paisley, with the new institution renamed as the University of the West of Scotland from 30 November 2007. Throughout 2006-07, close liaison and progressive harmonisation of practice took place between the two institutions. As mentioned above, one example was representation from Bell College on the university's first-year experience working group.

The College had established a first-year experience group. In January 2007, this group commissioned an internal study to highlight examples of teaching activities in the College, which were designed specifically to engage and empower first-year students. The ensuing report presented 32 examples drawn from the four schools. These illustrations also featured in a dissemination event held in June 2007. Qualifying comments from the two authors of the report were that:

- they became increasingly aware that they were only dealing with the 'tip of the iceberg' of work being undertaken with first-year students
- their study was not designed to tease out common threads, although that could be a valuable future activity
- seeking student opinion was also not part of the project's remit.

### 2.4.2   UHI Millennium Institute

Some contextual information about the University of the Highlands and Islands Millennium Institute may help to set the scene:

- 72 per cent of students are studying on a Higher National (HN) programme.
- Higher National Certificate (HNC) courses often involve one year of study.
- Many undergraduates progress from an HN course, which articulates to a two or one-year degree.
- 62 per cent of undergraduates study part-time.
- 72 per cent of undergraduates are over age 21 on entry.
- UHI is academically structured into four faculties, with programmes delivered through several academic partners (colleges and research institutes).

In the case of HN-level provision, UHI has limited options for changing curriculum design. Nonetheless, UHI has decided that lessons learned from discussions on engagement, empowerment and curriculum are capable of application, as appropriate, across all areas of provision.

A major component of UHI engagement with the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme was an 'Exploring the First Year' conference, held in May 2007 and attended by staff and students. Hazel Knox of the University of the West of Scotland provided an external input, and two internal speakers addressed 'First impressions count', and 'What I wish I'd known in the first year'. Six parallel workshops covered:

● using recognition of prior learning

● the first-year experience at a learning centre

● curriculum design for the first year

● developing scholarly skills

● developing a graduate career service

● supporting students with additional support needs.

The UHI online induction website was launched at the conference. There was also a display of UHI activities to support enhancement and on PDP in the first year.

In addition to discussions at the conference, the key dimensions of the Theme have featured in the deliberations of the:

● Learning and Teaching Committee

● Student Support Committee

● Marketing Committee and Admissions Sub-Group

● Student Journey Working Group.

The last named has the task of working across UHI committees and coordinating issues that impact on the initial student experience. Related work has entailed a project investigating best practice in orientation and the articulation of a cross-function timeline for induction, from pre-entry to the end of semester 1.

Five academic partner colleges have been engaged in a project exploring factors that influence the development of a culture of independent learners. Their report produced findings with policy, pedagogical, staff development, and information and communications technology (ICT) implications.

Emerging lessons and messages from institutional engagement with the Theme are as follows:

● While a 'one-size-fits-all' approach may not be the most effective, ways need to be found to accommodate emerging good practice into policies and practices.

● A more holistic view of supporting the student first-year journey could be effective and efficient, but would require adjustments to current practices.

● More needs to be done to understand students' expectations and perspectives on their experiences of timelines, modes of study, assessment practices and student life.

● A particular challenge may surround upscaling small initiatives of good practice and embedding them more widely within the institution. UHI is keenly awaiting the outputs and findings from the Enhancement Theme development project 'Personalisation of the first year'.

A range of responses to each of the key questions of the Theme were generated at the conference and through other channels and forums. These are being evaluated by relevant institutional committees and groups.

## 2.5    Specialist institutions

### 2.5.1   Edinburgh College of Art

A major thrust of activities has flowed from discussions among art schools, specifically in the areas of art and design. These revealed a shared desire to come together on a regular basis to discuss common concerns, issues and interests, and share good practice.

Edinburgh College of Art (ECA) has:

- actively participated in discussions among staff of the four Scottish art schools/colleges
- sought to heighten the profile of the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme within the institution
- considered ways of further improving the status of first-year teaching.

Inter-institutional collaboration was initiated by two symposia, held respectively at ECA and Glasgow School of Art (GSA). These focused on PDP, transition and the process of admission. There are significant differences between entry to the four-year degree programmes in Scotland and the three-year degree structure in England. An additional dimension is that almost half of the entrants to art and design programmes at ECA are direct entrants to the second year.

The symposium that was run at ECA was repeated at GSA on the following day to maximise opportunities for staff to attend. Generally, participants at both symposia valued the opportunities to meet, share common perspectives and explore issues, and wanted a continuing programme of meetings to be developed.

The prevailing philosophy for the art and design first-year curriculum at ECA is to cover a broad range of topics, with students choosing their specialist interest in the second year. If this is perceived as a desirable introduction, it poses significant curricular questions in relation to the substantial cohort who enter directly into the more specialised structure of provision offered in the second year.

ECA, in line with practice in the other Scottish art schools/colleges, places a high premium on teaching in art and design programmes. Within that ethos and culture, particular benefits and complications may derive from the fact that a proportion of the teaching is done by part-time staff/practitioners.

Since art and design programmes depend extensively on reflection and self-criticism, ECA and the other art schools/colleges are exploring the most effective uses of student PDP, including the keeping of reflective logbooks and electronic portfolios.

Generally, the nature of the intake, active competition for a place in a specific institution, and the powerful student commitment to art and/or design means that student engagement is not a major issue for ECA. Likewise, student traditions in art schools/colleges strongly favour high levels of social integration and active staff/student creative learning interactions, even in the first year.

### 2.5.2  Glasgow School of Art

Between February and June 2007, staff teaching the first year from three Schools (Fine Art, Design and Architecture), along with those from the Department of Historical and Critical Studies, met on several occasions to discuss, among other things, the nature and purposes of the first year at GSA and in art schools in general, the structure of the curricula and teaching strategies. These meetings facilitated sharing of practice and enabled new collaborations to form, such as parallel projects between Fine Art and Historical and Critical Studies.

GSA also provided case studies for the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme development projects on personalisation and scholarship skills. The latter drew on the use of dynamic project briefs in first-year Fine Art as a demonstration of the development of scholarship skills. The request for a case study on personalisation presented an interesting challenge in interpreting the meaning, followed by a stimulating debate about practice in creative arts, where enquiry-based learning is commonplace. Two outcomes were the reinforcement of these learning and teaching strategies in the School and a desire to make them more explicit.

As mentioned above, GSA joined with ECA, Gray's School of Art and Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design in two symposia for creative arts staff, held on 19 and 20 June 2007. The primary focus in both cases was on issues of student PDP and the introduction of scholarship skills in the first year. Discussion also encompassed research-teaching linkages, as student research - even in the first year - is seen as intrinsic to art and design practice. Since GSA is in the process of implementing student PDP for the 2007-08 academic session, the opportunity for institutional discussion of that aspect of the Theme was invaluable. A supporting staff development workshop was held in September.

At GSA, student engagement and empowerment are seen as embodied by studio education, as are student research and the ethos of reflective learning. Thus the focus has been on ways in which scholarship skills and reflection are specifically used in the learning experience of students, and how these skills and capabilities can effectively be captured and facilitated by student PDP, student feedback, improving pre-entry information and exploring ways of aligning institutional and student expectations.

### 2.5.3  Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama

The Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (RSAMD) perceives its reference group as other conservatories. However, it shares some similarities with the art schools in terms of highly committed entrants, an ethos of student research as an integral part of the learning process, active engagement in learning (and in this case performance), active learning collaboration between students and staff, and a strong culture among staff of dedication to teaching and learning.

In essence, RSAMD has two principal areas of academic provision: music and drama, both the subject of consecutive major reviews of the undergraduate curriculum - the School of Drama in 2006-07 and the School of Music in 2007-08. In this process of review, particular attention is being given to the nature of the first year and ways of further shifting the emphasis to learning.

Distinctive features at RSAMD include the assignment of students to a teacher in the first year, an arrangement that continues through to graduation. When combined with the vocational and largely prescribed nature of the courses, this leads to tightly knit and supportive student cohorts and close creative teacher/student relationships. Teaching is often one-to-one or in small ensembles/groups.

### 2.5.4 Scottish Agricultural College

The Scottish Agricultural College (SAC) has three campuses: Aberdeen, Ayr and Edinburgh. Provision includes students taking one-year HN programmes as well as those studying for undergraduate or postgraduate degrees. Strategies, policies and practices must be responsive to the varied needs of this range of student profiles.

In common with other specialist institutions with comparatively small total enrolment, SAC has an established tradition of seeking the engagement of students, academically and socially.

Practices vary across programmes, however, and one strand of the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme-related endeavours has been to explore how successful initiatives within one academic area of SAC might be adopted, possibly with adaptation, elsewhere. One such example surrounds the practice of voluntary field trips, which are perceived as motivational and invaluable in promoting the early academic and social integration of first-year students. As a result of discussions, plans have been developed to extend an invitation to students on other programmes based at the Edinburgh campus to participate in the trip. The Aberdeen campus holds a broadly equivalent but shorter trip towards the end of semester 1.

These nuances and other topics featured in the discussions of the teacher liaison group (TLG) during the year. Another topic of discussion at the TLG was assessment, including the use of peer and self-assessment.

Over a period of three years, SAC has combined students from various programmes in shared classes. This could have raised challenges in terms of integration, but these have been addressed by activities such as field trips, which play an important bonding role as well as a vital academic function.

On the Aberdeen campus, specific efforts have been made to target student induction to various subgroups, for example mature students, part-time students and school leavers.

Various measures have been adopted to access students' experiences and expectations. A forum was held with students who took part in the four-day Highlands field trip. This elicited views of the field trip and more generally about the first year. One finding regarding the latter was an apparent distinction between the expectations of mature

students and school leavers. The former viewed the first-year as a route towards a career change, whereas school leavers were inclined to view it as part of their learning journey.

Two student cohorts were surveyed (Adventure Tourism and Countryside Management). In both cases, students' views were sought on expectations, experiences, engagement and empowerment. One recurrent finding was that SAC students valued the relaxed and informal environments of their respective campus and easy everyday access to staff. Consequently, discussions at the TLG concluded that the first-year experience at SAC may be one which suits the needs of students and aligns with the ethos of the institution.

SAC held an Education Conference in September 2007 to further explore aspects of the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme. The institution also plans to disseminate and act on relevant findings from the Theme's nine projects (listed in the Appendix).

## 2.6    Overview

The above material has presented a rich, if incomplete, summary of highlights from initiatives, discussions and deliberations in Scottish HEIs on various dimensions of the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme.

Engagement is a recurrent topic, and there were numerous examples of institution-wide and localised actions to foster the effective academic and social engagement and integration of first-year students.

Many institutions were using or piloting peer mentoring or buddy schemes to facilitate engagement and as a means of confidence-building and empowerment. In similar vein, institutions displayed optimism that, in time, student PDP could be an important vehicle for personalising empowerment and promoting grounded autonomous learning.

Of course the challenges are considerable and well understood. The greatest challenge remains to find an effective means of influencing appropriately and meaningfully the experience of every first-year student. Compulsion does not rest comfortably with concepts of autonomy. Studies continue to show that bombarding students with information or exhortations does not appear to be a particularly effective communication strategy. This suggests, as institutions develop, that sophisticated and targeted strategies might be more productive - particularly when these are modelled and reinforced in peer/student and staff/student exchanges and interactions.

Scottish HEIs have responded positively to the opportunity to share, reflect, discuss and deliberate on issues, initiatives and challenges associated with engagement and empowerment. This is impressive given their existing commitment to various actions. It suggests that the processes surrounding the implementation of this Enhancement Theme have been broadly welcomed.

Another encouraging feature has been the expressions of ongoing commitment, a desire to learn from the outputs of the Theme's various projects, and an intention to progress discussions and deliberations in various ways, with the likelihood of further actions, initiatives and investigations. Indeed, a number of institutions engaged directly with specific projects during the initial developmental phase.

The highlights in this section have demonstrated a range of organisational responses to the issues of engagement and empowerment through the formation of working groups, cross-institutional committees and enhancement networks. These spanned strategic, operational and developmental/discursive/disseminational remits. Generally, they were carefully integrated into existing structures, with clear reporting lines to senior academic officers or other key postholders, and to core academic committees. In some institutions, especially smaller ones, the organisational framework was often relatively streamlined. In general, larger institutions aligned the initiatives with the prevailing macro-devolved academic structure of colleges/faculties/schools, using pan-institutional groups to shape, steer and share ideas and debates on policies and practices. In these various ways, institutions have been seeking to achieve what Krause (2007a) depicted as an advanced level of organisational response alongside policies to encourage more localised actions, championing and experimentation.

# 3  Supporting material from the Higher Education Academy

The project looked at three principal areas of HEA output and support: the literature survey by Harvey, Drew and Smith (2006), the report by Yorke and Longden (2007) on a study of the first-year experience in HE, and illustrations from a sample of Subject Centres.

## 3.1    Literature survey

In spring 2007, HEA released four targeted summaries from the substantial literature survey on the first-year experience that Harvey, Drew and Smith undertook for it in 2006. These briefing papers (by Harvey and Drew) were for policy-makers and practitioners, for researchers, on induction, and on integration respectively. They can be downloaded from the HEA website (see the references section in this report for details). *The Briefing on integration* is 23 pages in length; the others are shorter (eight, nine and 14 pages). Collectively they provide valuable information and insights.

## 3.2    Study on the first-year experience in HE

Another recent HEA output (2007) was the final report of Phase 1 of a study by Yorke and Longden on *The first-year experience in higher education in the UK*. Half of the 50-page report is devoted to the survey questionnaire. There is then a four-page section on the first-year experience in Australia and the UK, followed by a longer section on a qualitative analysis of the student voice. In their concluding observations, Yorke and Longden (p43) observed that:

- The student experience in most aspects of teaching and learning was generally good, but it ranged from superior through to inferior at the level of both institutions and subjects.
- The qualitative data pointed to the importance of students making friendships. The authors suggested that institutions assist that goal by adopting appropriate pedagogic approaches.
- The data suggested that teaching was perceived as strongest in the humanities, although similar strengths emerged in other subject areas at the institutional level of analysis. The authors deduced that this 'may reflect a particular type of approach to student engagement which invites consideration of the extent to which its features could be drawn upon to more general benefit'.
- The strongest influences for withdrawal appeared to be worry over finance and lack of good information about the programme and/or institutions. Additionally, the greater the number of risk factors in the student's experience, the greater the chance of withdrawal being considered.

## 3.3 Outcomes from HEA Subject Centres

Most, if not all, HEA Subject Centres have initiatives that directly or indirectly relate to the first-year experience (for example, the work on students with disabilities by the Geography, Geology and Environmental Science (GEES) Subject Centre).

Highlights from the responses received included the following:

- A project on the sixth form to university transition in languages led by Gallagher-Brett and Canning (Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS) Subject Centre). This has built on earlier work by Gallagher-Brett on undergraduate experiences of reading in a second language.

- The Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism (HLST) network's production of several resources and case studies. Articles and presentations can be found by using the search facility on the webpage and typing 'first year'. Examples of the resources are:
  - Sport Studies Students' Approaches to Study and their First-Year Experience with Blended Learning
  - Using Flexible Learning and Online Resources to Enhance Student Support and the First-Year Experience
  - Developing the Reflective Learner: A Case Study in the Engagement of Foundation Degree Students in Reflective Practice
  - Learning Lessons from a Pilot Viva Style Assessment in Level 1 of Degree Programmes.

- Several projects and published articles on the first year experience supported by the Psychology network. These include:
  - fostering critical thinking and autonomy - the learner self-achievement record (LASER)
  - evaluating the effect of a peer mentoring project on attendance, retention and academic performance in undergraduate psychology students (in progress)
  - promoting authorship among psychology students (in progress). As part of this, in 2005-06 Thames Valley University piloted a programme of tutorials on writing for year 1 psychology students, which has since progressed to embedded workshops in assessed year 1 modules.

- Goddard and Beard's report *As Simple as ABC?* (2007), published by the English Subject Centre, which dealt with transition issues for students of English language A-level going on to study English language/linguistics in HE.

- Responding to recruitment issues in computing, the Information and Computer Sciences (ICS) Subject Centre's work on pre-entry perceptions of computing, potential disjunction between the ICT curriculum in schools and universities, personal and contextual factors affecting course choices by students, and actions the HE ICS community could take to address some of these problems.

A guide is being drafted on enhancing the first-year experience for engineering students. This work by the Engineering Subject Centre will include an audit tool. It draws on results from focus groups with engineering students, as well as results from the HEA first-year experience survey and the National Student Survey. The Engineering Subject Centre is also putting on its website the first-year card sort game developed for Engineering students by Glasgow Caledonian University.

Engineering worked closely with the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning PROGRESS project led by the University of Hull, and ran a series of workshops on the first year as part of the dissemination strategy (www.engsc.ac.uk/nef/events/first_year_experience.asp). The workshop used the first-year experience audit (www.engsc.ac.uk/downloads/FirstYearExperienceAudit.pdf).

# 4 Illustrations of approaches from the English sector

A great deal of work is also taking place in the English HE sector in relation to various aspects of the first year. Reference is made in this report to examples in the literature survey by Harvey, Drew and Smith (2006) and in the reports of other First Year Experience Enhancement Theme projects (see, for example, the report on transition).

Consequently, only four illustrations are given in this section. First, there is an outline of the sustained endeavours at the University of Teesside, then a brief note of three other initiatives, one of which (by Bryson) represented dissemination to a Scottish audience.

The University of Teesside's approaches featured as a case study in the Responding to Student Needs Enhancement Theme. Teesside has in place a range of strategies and initiatives to enhance the first-year experience, both school-based and centrally focused. These are connected by the university's retention plan.

For more than 17 years the University of Teesside has been an active partner of the American-based National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. It also has in place an established first-year experience strategy.

In 2002-04, Teesside used European Social Fund (ESF) money to investigate the retention of non-traditional students. This work featured in a report entitled *Retaining Non-Traditional Students in Higher Education* (University of Teesside, 2005). Subsequently, the work was extended to other areas. Further ESF money in 2007 allowed the exploration of additional illustrative strategies. The Retention Team Office has produced a guide for staff on supporting retention through the curriculum.

Teesside operates a system of six school-based student support officers who are also part of the central Retention Team. Their role is to provide a link between students and sources of assistance (such as personal tutors and programme leaders). Additionally, the Retention Team acts as a source of advice for academic staff, for example, on evidence-based practice.

Student peer mentoring featured in the first ESF project and has subsequently been extended across the institution. A more recent development is YourNeeds@Tees, a virtual learning environment-based source of support for students.

Another established Teesside initiative is TOPS (Twenty-One Plus Students). More than half of Teesside's intake are mature students. Through TOPS they have the opportunity to come to a dedicated pre-induction programme held just prior to welcome week. Teesside has achieved good levels of retention among mature students, which is at least partly attributed to TOPS and other related initiatives.

At Edge Hill University, Mark Schofield and colleagues have distilled the first-year experience literature review (Harvey, Drew and Smith, 2006) into a self-analysis and review tool, which is being piloted in the institution. Essentially, the tool lists the principal headings and themes from the literature and then asks participants if each, in turn, is a challenge in the institution, and if so why and what actions should be undertaken (when? who? how?). The tool allows space for notes and further thoughts.

The work of White (University of Southampton) and others on the jumpstart programme for first-year students in electronics and computer science featured in a paper *Brave New World: Can We Engineer a Better Start for Freshers?* in the proceedings of the 35th ASEE/IEEE Frontiers in Education Pedagogies and Technologies for the Emerging Global Economy (pp26-31) (White and Carr, 2005). This is one example of initiatives within HEIs across a wide range of programmes, but especially in science and technology, to enable entering students to adjust to their discipline-based studies in HE more quickly.

In November 2006, Colin Bryson (Nottingham Trent University) and others ran a one-day conference in Edinburgh, co-convened by the HEA and sparqs. It built on an earlier workshop held in York in December 2007. Both events targeted sharing thinking, research and practice on ways of enhancing student engagement.

# 5 Developments in Hong Kong

## 5.1  Introduction - the switch from a three to a four-year undergraduate curriculum

In 2012, HEIs in Hong Kong switch from a three to a four-year undergraduate curriculum, primarily in response to a shortening of the time spent in senior secondary education and revisions to the senior school curriculum. From 2012, pupils in Hong Kong will complete secondary education based on a core curriculum of mathematics, English, Chinese and liberal studies, rather than the current practice of clusters of Advanced Levels.

Overseen by the University Grants Committee Hong Kong (UGC), HEIs are currently preparing for this change. To assist them they are receiving some additional funds to release staff to undertake the academic developmental work and to address infrastructure issues associated with a potential double intake of students in 2012. Institutions will also have to handle two cohorts post-2012 as the three-year degrees are phased out. There will be significant administrative and quality assurance challenges during these transitions. Over the next four years, institutions also face a new process of quality review.

Lengthening the duration of the undergraduate degree is posing interesting challenges to Hong Kong HEIs and their constituent academic communities. Discussions and planning are ongoing. The following remarks are based on interviews held in Hong Kong during visits in November 2006 and March 2007. Further information has been sought via email exchanges.

UGC has encouraged institutions to take the opportunity to address possibilities such as productive ways of creating study bridges between departments/faculties, delaying student decisions on majors until the second year, broadening the curriculum, considering ways of recognising informal (non-curricular) learning, and taking a whole-person approach. Programmes will be expected to weave an outcome-based approach to student learning into the curricula. With UGC support, an inter-institutional task force has been established to share experiences, discuss issues and generally champion the endeavour.

HEIs are reporting annually on progress in developing the four-year normative undergraduate curriculum. They will shortly be expected to incorporate their plans within the triennial strategic planning cycle. Although institutions could formally defer final decisions for some time, most expect to finalise their plans by 2009, and some are planning to phase in changes from 2008 onwards.

Some academics, especially in science and engineering, have expressed concerns over the implications of the changes to the senior school curriculum. However, the prevalent view in discussions with institutional contacts was that attention was primarily focused on addressing the challenges and opportunities that the changes could produce.

Three final introductory comments may provide useful contextual pointers. Firstly, Hong Kong HEIs were strongly represented in the latest top 200 world universities list. Secondly, non-progression rates in Hong Kong HEIs are low by international standards. Thirdly, with the exception of the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the university sector in Hong Kong is comparatively young. Many of the HEIs originated as vocational institutions during the twentieth century.

## 5.2    Developments in five HEIs

### 5.2.1   City University of Hong Kong

At City University of Hong Kong, Senate has adopted draft proposals on the curricular structure of the four-year degree. These emanated from a steering committee chaired by the President. The student-centred perspective aims to produce graduates who can function in an interconnected global environment and be resilient, adaptive and team oriented.

The proposed curriculum requires a minimum of 120 credit units, with an upper limit of 144 credit units. Of these, students will be expected to undertake 30 units of General Education courses, with the remainder devoted to major, minor and free electives. Students can enrol in a double major (45 units in the primary major, 30 from the second major). It is proposed that the General Education requirements will include eight credit units on English communication skills and three units from each of arts and humanities, the study of societies, social and business organisations, and science and technology.

The curriculum will also provide students with internship and overseas experience opportunities.

### 5.2.2   Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

At Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (UST), the discussions have connected directly to existing policies in relation to the attributes of UST graduates, which are academic excellence, broad-based education; leadership and teamwork; international outlook; vision and an orientation to the future; and ethical standards and compassion.

The detailed discussions have been guided by a desire to transform the undergraduate experience, for example by:

- admitting students into schools rather than specific programmes, to facilitate flexibility
- delaying choices of major to the second year
- providing a broader school-organised induction to the curriculum
- promoting an inquiry-based approach aimed at connecting classroom learning and laboratory studies
- affording time and scope for out-of-class enrichment activities (internships, international exchanges, community service)
- using the School of Innovation and Technology Management as a vehicle for enabling students to gain experiences of advances in and across disciplines.

Discussions are taking place with academic staff over the general education/discipline-specific balance in the four-year curriculum, and about the most appropriate providers for certain elements. Contemporaneously, the Council (governing body) is highly supportive of arguments favouring a broader, more competence-oriented education.

It is likely that the institution will use 2009-12 as a transition point triennium. To do so, academic decisions need to be completed by 2008-09. In any case, all Hong Kong HEIs are under pressure to notify secondary schools as soon as possible of any specific pre-requirements they intend to expect for entry in 2012.

UST, along with some other Hong Kong HEIs, is introducing a new student administrative system to handle the anticipated additional complexities of tracking in the four-year curriculum.

5.2.3   University of Hong Kong

University of Hong Kong (HKU) established a steering committee on the four-year undergraduate curriculum, supported by seven subcommittees dedicated to the academic advisory system, assessment, diverse learning experience, IT in the curriculum, language across the curriculum, staff engagement, and staff development and the student learning experience.

The steering committee focused initially on outlining a set of educational principles to guide discussions. It also targeted staff engagement in the developments through a series of seminars open to all staff. These seminars featured international and in-house presenters, including staff from Law, which had recently developed a four-year curriculum (triggered by a separate set of arguments).

HKU is now moving to the next phase of the discussion, building on a broad agreement over the principles. This phase is focusing on how the principles will be achieved and what common elements the learning experience should entail. Currently the sub-committees are conducting discussions with each faculty on practices and views. This evidence-based work has informed discussion papers and steered dialogues. This will continue into 2008/09 as the institution progresses plans for implementation.

While Medicine already follows an outcome-based approach, for the remaining faculties it will be a challenge. The Director of the Centre for the Advancement of University Teaching will be working closely with each faculty on appropriate interpretation of outcomes, educational principles and student attributes.

Discussions are progressing at faculty level on ways of facilitating increased flexibility into the year 1 curriculum and repacking the structuring of the first year. For example, science will probably be taught in two blocks, physical and biological respectively, with students then specialising in year 2.

5.2.4   Hong Kong Polytechnic University

There is a recognition in Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU), certainly at senior levels, that paradigm shifts will be associated with introducing the four-year degree (for example, a shift to more interactive learning). Concerns about the implications stemming from changes to the senior secondary school curriculum mean that careful

attention has been paid to the articulation of prerequisites. Most subjects have decided to indicate preferred qualifications rather than require them for entry.

While there is some internal opposition, PolyU plans to adopt broadly-based groupings of disciplines for entry purposes, rather than the current discipline-based pattern. In similar vein, the institution is progressing discussion on common components for year 1 in each of the intended discipline groups, with the expectation that more detailed choices for specialisation would normally be deferred until year 2.

PolyU has a fairly high proportion of professional degrees and programmes, which meet specific Hong Kong staffing needs (eg in logistics). Thus, a significant issue is to ensure that these needs can continue to be addressed satisfactorily in the new four-year curriculum.

The relatively low drop-out rates in Hong Kong HEIs stem from several factors. One highlighted by some academics in PolyU and elsewhere is the current 'good' entry standard in mathematics.

Overall, there is a recognition, at least at senior levels, that the introduction of the four-year degree may involve a significant 'culture shift' for many individuals, programmes and departments.

On 20 March 2007, the South China Morning Post published a supplement marking the 70th anniversary of the origins of PolyU. In this publication the university was described as being excited about the extended four-year degree, which was viewed as a great opportunity for staff and students. The Vice President (Academic Development) was quoted as indicating that PolyU would capitalise on the curricular changes by introducing an element of broad-based General Education. Emphasis would be placed on competences such as creativity, critical thinking, leadership, team playing and problem-solving. The extra year in the curriculum should also facilitate enabling students to spend some time studying overseas.

5.2.5   Hong Kong Baptist University

Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) was founded some 51 years ago with sponsorship from the US Southern Baptist Church. Initially, its qualifications took four years to achieve. This was reduced to three years in 1988, five years after the Hong Kong Government became responsible for funding. The former four-year qualification resembled the 'American model', with specialisation in the final two years. A General Education component has been retained in year 1 of the current three-year degree. It is planned to retain this tradition in the four-year degree.

Consequently, HKBU is looking at ways of promoting arts and General Education, in addition to the established commitment to the whole education of students. In relation to the latter, an important focus is on the development of 'servant leadership'. The belief is that students should seek to serve and lead in the community, but first they should serve and gain experience and expertise. HKBU students are not required to be practising Christians, although they do study a class in the meaning of life.

As part of the preparatory work for the four-year degree, HKBU is using HKUGC funding to appoint consultants and release staff to progress whole person education, quality assurance and curriculum design. HKBU plans to apply greater attention to English and

Chinese in the four-year curriculum, probably increasing the numbers of modules by 50 per cent. It is recognised that in future science subjects may need to provide additional help to students in year 1 (and possibly in semester 1 of year 2).

Part of the strategy for promoting community service among students is the use of internships. These range from three months to a year. HKBU students are generally very successful in gaining employment after graduation, and this is attributed in part to the effectiveness of internships. Consideration is being given to enabling students to have one semester off, for internships or time abroad, within the four-year degree curriculum.

The task force on the four-year degree at HKBU (on which every faculty is represented) has developed papers outlining a framework that have been approved by Senate.

However, much of the detail has still to be agreed, so progress is in large measure still at an important developmental phase. It may take until 2009 before the fully developed detailed proposals are agreed and in place. Significant challenges include retaining the uniqueness of HKBU while balancing departmental needs and developing a four-year degree that is attractive to students.

## 5.3    Overview

The above material drew on interviews held in November 2006 and March 2007 with senior academic leaders in the sample HEIs in Hong Kong. It is likely that matters have progressed in some or all of the institutions, although more recent conversations with two interviewees indicated no substantial deviation from the expected path of developmental deliberations. It is anticipated that within the next six to 24 months all of the HEIs in Hong Kong will have finalised their plans. Indeed, some intend to start progressive implementation within that time span.

Four messages emerging from the Hong Kong experiences were:

● the need for widespread consultation with and involvement across the academic community
● the desirability of aligning proposals with institutional culture and mission
● the sensitive relationship between the articulation of an overarching principle and/or framework and the capacity for potential for flexibility in detailed interpretation at the level of faculties/schools
● the need for integrated planning of procedures, systems and timelines and thorough consideration of the associated implications of proposed changes.

Perhaps the principal message was that these are complex changes, which require careful and sustained attention, interactive testing and checking, and an inbuilt capacity for amendment and refinement.

# 6 Australian experiences and approaches

## 6.1 The DEST report

A substantial report of a 2004 study, *The first-year experience in Australian universities: Findings from a decade of national studies,* was published in 2005 by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), Canberra (www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/policy_issues_reviews/key_issues/assuring_quality_in_higher_education/first_year_experience_aust_uni.htm). The report, by Krause et al, is arranged in eight sections:

- CSHE national studies 1994-2004

- aspirations, changes and uncertainty in the first year

- student expectations and adjustments to university study

- engaging with learners and learning at university

- managing commitments in the first year

- perceptions of teaching and satisfaction with courses

- the first-year experience of significant student groups

- ten years on: trends, transformations and conclusions.

Distilling messages from the data 1994-2004, the authors highlighted the following (ppiv-v):

- Students cited both academic interest and careers as important reasons for choosing to study in HE.

- By 2004, occupational aspirations might have been exercising complex influences. Just over 10 per cent deferred enrolment, but the proportion considering deferral or discontinuation declined to just over a quarter of 2004 respondents.

- Generally, with the exception of international students, there had been a reduction in the proportion of students feeling that experiences at university overall had not met their expectations.

- Even so, about one-third felt ill prepared to choose a course on entry and a slightly higher proportion (about 40 per cent) considered that schools could do more to prepare them for university study.

- 2004 was the first occasion when the views of mature students were examined in some detail. Generally, they were positive about study in HE and their experiences, although less inclined to engage in extracurricular activities.

- While first-year students' satisfaction had improved, a substantial number of respondents did not believe that staff were readily accessible. For example, just under one third of students felt that staff were interested in their progress.

- By 2004 most students accessed online resources and used email for academic (and personal) communication, although online discussions were still atypical.
- The 2004 data permitted exploration of demographic subgroups. The authors concluded that, despite similarities of experiences, subgroup differences merited institutional consideration.

The concluding section of the report was devoted to a discussion of potential strategic directions and areas for future research. Seven key topics were identified:

- the transforming first-year experience
- dimensions of student engagement in the first year
- experience of diverse student groups in the first year
- financing undergraduate study and the first-year experience
- enhancing first-year teaching and curriculum
- sustainable and responsive first-year initiatives in universities
- first-year experience research methodologies.

Those wishing further details should consult the full report. Here, brief consideration is given to three topics: transforming, engagement and sustainable initiatives.

The study found increasing influences of part-time student employment and use of ICT. Contemporaneously, there had been growth in the number of students enrolled in combined degree programmes. The authors suggested that these trends raised a raft of issues that merited investigation, including possibly a study of academic and support staff perceptions of the implications for pedagogy and student support (p87). They posited that orientation might be a challenge in double-degree programmes. They also briefly aired possible implications of a more client-centred approach, suggesting that institutions should seek to balance shaping and being shaped by student expectations (p87).

While student perceptions of teaching had improved, areas for enhancement included feedback and perceptions of staff interest and accessibility. Various strategies were mentioned, including professional development, resourcing of first-year courses, better communication, better use of ICT to provide feedback, and enhanced monitoring of learning and teaching issues.

In 2000, *Trends in the First-Year Experience* (McInnis, James and Hartley, cited by Krause et al, p3) identified various initiatives. In their 2004 study, Krause et al got positive feedback from students on the success of these initiatives. In summary, they found that first-year transition programmes were widely implemented across Australian institutions, but there was much more limited evidence of evaluation to inform embedding and sustainability. The authors deduced that efforts often depended on individuals or small groups who championed the cause (p89).

## 6.2 Krause's cycle of institutional development and the first-year experience

In March 2007, Kerri-Lee Krause was a keynote speaker at the Annual Enhancement Themes Conference. Her presentation drew on the DEST report and her subsequent research, *On being strategic about the first year* and *New perspectives on engaging first-year students in learning* (Krause, 2007b and 2007c).

On the status of first-year teaching, Krause pointed to work by the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching, where awards for excellence in teaching have recognised programmes and individuals in relation to enhancing the first-year student experience. Her key lessons from the Australian experience of initiatives relating to the first year were the need to:

- monitor and manage changing student expectations
- plan for and manage diversity
- measure and monitor first-year student engagement
- pursue strategic integration of ICT to enhance learning and teaching
- bridge the divide between practice and policy in the first year.

Krause offered a cycle of institutional development in relation to the first-year experience, starting with enthusiastic individuals and initiatives addressing transition, through locating a home for such initiatives and seeking greater coordination and cross-institutional action, to monitoring, evaluating and reporting, which in turn would inform institutional policy-making and enable actions in the disciplines.

It would be useful for institutions and individuals to reflect where their institution, department, programme or initiative primarily sits in relation to Krause's cycle and then to consider what, if anything, needs to be done, how and by whom.

## 6.3 Australian HEI first-year websites and initiatives

Australian HEIs have websites relating to the first-year experience. Illustrative examples include:

www.uts.edu.au/teachlearn/resources.html
www.firstyear.unsw.edu.au/content/fyresources/ref3-2_students.cfm?ss=0
www.itl.usyd.edu.au/FYE
www.scu.edu.au/students/firstyear
www.services.unimelb.edu.au/transition

The Australian Universities Quality Agency maintains a database on good practice. Illustrations of commended first-year endeavours are:

- Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) programme at the University of Wollongong
www.auqa.edu.au/gp/search/detail.php?gp_id=2608

- Central Queensland University, Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) and Student Mentor and Leadership Programme
www.auqa.edu.au/gp/search/detail.php?gp_id=2578
www.auqa.edu.au/gp/search/detail.php?gp_id=2563

- Charles Sturt University (CSU) student-centred student services
www.auqa.edu.au/gp/search/detail.php?gp_id=1922

- University of New England TRACKS Indigenous Tertiary Preparation Programme
www.auqa.edu.au/gp/search/detail.php?gp_id=1678

A well-established Australian/Pacific Rim Conference on the First-Year Experience is hosted by Queensland University of Technology. Papers can be accessed at: www.fyhe.qut.edu.au

Dawn Darlaston-Jones (University of Notre Dame) has several relevant publications. In addition to her DPhil Thesis (2004) on *Evidence from the Survivors: Factors Affecting Retention of Undergraduate Psychology Students at a Western Australian University and Implicators for Cultural Change within Higher Education* (Edith Cowan University), see in particular the 2003 paper Darlaston-Jones, D, et al 'The Retention and Persistence Support (RAPS) Project: A Transition Initiative', *Issues in Education Research*, 13.

A detailed example of an Australian university learning skills website is provided by Charles Sturt University. This is a regional university in a predominantly rural setting, but it also has a substantial level of off-campus (including overseas) provision. MyCSU, the student portal, enables registered students to access dedicated and extensive sets of learning skills briefings as well as course notes and administrative information. There is also a hard copy version, *Putting It Together: a guide to learning at CSU*.

# 7 The American scene

The United States represents the first example of a society reaching what is now termed a mass HE system. As such, the system is vast. It is also very diverse and differentiated. Another distinctive feature is the role of General Education, especially in the first year.

Surveying that complexity is not the purpose of this section, nor could it realistically be attempted without a sustained programme of research. Attention is focused instead on a small selection of illustrations: trans-institutional dimensions and initiatives, and two institutional vignettes.

## 7.1   National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience

The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience is based at the University of South Carolina. In essence, the journey started from an initiative led by the then President of the University. The outcome of a taskforce (1970-72) was to create the University 101 programme to inculcate students into the behaviours expected in HE. The Founding Director and colleagues borrowed an established idea, the First-Year Seminar, as a basis for the programme.

In 1982, the First National Conference on the Freshman Seminar/Freshman Orientation Course concept was organised. In 1986, the First International Conference took place in Newcastle in the UK. The 20th International Conference in Hawaii in July 2007 attracted 670 attendees. Now the Center organises several sets of annual conferences, arranges a summer institute for deans and department chairs, provides a clearing house for resources, runs a LISTSERV (email list management software) and produces various publications and reports.

In 1986, the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education agreed to a proposal that the Center be named the National Center for the Study of the Freshman-Year Experience. The current name of National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience was adopted in 1998. Since 1999, the National Resource Center has actively collaborated with the Policy Center on the First Year of College.

Three features merit highlighting. First, the Center is an excellent example of a fairly substantial oak tree growing from a small acorn. Second, it epitomises the importance of stability, persistence, the attraction and retention of dedicated individuals, and the potential of networking and sharing experiences. Third, it demonstrates the importance of focusing and refocusing. Over time, the work of the Center and the endeavours of the various conferences have actively sought to engage wider audiences - countries, institutions and groups/stakeholders. Examples of the latter include staff from student affairs, academics and institutional researchers.

In their Primer Paper for First-Time Attendees at the 20th International Conference 2007 several future priorities for work on the first-year experience were identified, including:

● increasing the emphasis upon relevant research

● adapting offerings to meet changing needs and demands

● continuing to share and disseminate materials and findings

● seeking ways to recognise excellence in undergraduate education.

Some of these topics extend beyond the first year.


## 7.2 Illustrations from two American HEIs

There has been considerable longstanding interest in, and action on, the first-year experience within the American HE sector. Action in the two illustrative HEIs described below has drawn on the literature, various national surveys and action-oriented communities, but each institution has developed its own distinctive stance and set of strategies.

### 7.2.1 Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

In 2004, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) articulated an *Improvement Plan for the First-Year Experience.* IUPUI committed to a Foundations of Excellence in the First College Year project, based on the *Dimensions* of the Foundations for Excellence™ project. The full report of the project (the *Improvement Plan*) can be downloaded from http://uc.iupui.edu/uploadedFiles/Assessment/ImprovementPlan.pdf (accessed January 2008).

The project was developed by a 21-member cross-institutional Foundation Task Force. In the executive summary of the Improvement Plan, the view was expressed that 'participation in the Foundations Project has enabled IUPUI to conceptualise our first-year interventions in a new way, to celebrate what is working and to call attention to work that still needs to be done'. The Task Force Report identified many areas that they considered IUPUI had successfully developed to enhance the first-year experience of students. It then turned to several topics meriting further attention, including:

● engaging new faculty with the philosophy of the first year

● rewarding faculty with high levels of interaction with first-year students

● communicating first-year success information to families of first-year students

● developing a programme for transfer students.

IUPUI is an example of an institution in which a key component of organisational structure is the University College with its own dean. At IUPUI, this College works in partnership in faculties, schools and administrative units in relation to the first-year experience. In essence, it is charged with coordinating induction and orientation and with progressing ways of engaging first-year students, enabling them to gain a more coherent experience from their General Education requirements, facilitating learning from co-curricular experiences, and promoting peer bonding and immersion into the culture of the institution.

An Associate of the National Resource Center at the University of South Carolina is working with the Dean of University College, IUPUI, the Dean of University College, University of Texas El Paso and others on a study of the university college movement in the USA. Initial analyses have suggested that while university colleges were united by an aspiration to provide a structure that would facilitate a comprehensive approach to delivery of the first year, their roles and remits differ in detail.

IUPUI runs various first-year-related programmes such as the first-year seminar, critical inquiry course, summer academy and themed learning communities. Detailed annual evaluations are undertaken of each activity.

### 7.2.2   University of Washington, Washington State

For some time, the University of Washington (UW) has operated a Freshman Seminar Series at the start of each academic year. Topics offered in autumn 2006 included: Modern Product Research and Engineering; Exploring Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Issues; What is Philosophy?; Recovery of Function from a Central Nervous System Trauma; DNA Dilemmas; and Diversity Issues in Science. Each seminar has a General Education code and is valued at one credit.

A second strand consists of the opportunity for students to enrol in Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs). The initiative has operated at the university for some 15 years, and the UW website (http://depts.washington.edu/figs) states that around 70 per cent of freshers register for a FIG. FIGs only run in the autumn semester. A FIG is described as a pre-packaged cluster of high-demand fresher courses taught in small (20-25) common groups of students (same students in each class). FIGs fulfil General Education requirements and allow social networking among students, by enabling them to form their own UW community.

One element of the cluster of classes is the two-credit class The University Community. Each group in this class is facilitated by a FIG leader, an experienced undergraduate student who serves as a guide to UW. The University Community class is specifically designed to assist transition into UW. As part of the curriculum, participants have the opportunity to take part in social and extracurricular activities. They are also inducted into the e-portfolio tool, which students are expected to use to record and reflect on their past, present and future.

In 2006-07, the university introduced an additional initiative, the UW Common Book. Agreement was reached that all new students would read a common book (Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains*). The initiative was intended to move the commonality of experience of freshers at UW to a different level, involving the entire first-year intake and linking the Common Book to their specific studies. UW also planned visits by the author and the subject of the book, Dr Paul Farmer, who is described in the subtitle of the book as 'A man who would cure the world'. It would be very interesting to read an evaluation of this initiative after a few years, particularly to see to what extent UW has managed to achieve the important academic additionality, which was a prime purpose of the venture.

Many of the activities at UW demonstrate actions taken in other US universities and colleges, such as first-year seminars and focused interest groups. Many institutions use variants of common reading, either pre-entry or for focused interest groups or seminar groups. It is the upscaling of the concept at UW that is of interest, combined with the fact that implementing the idea required acceptance by the different disciplines within the academic community. In addition to pursuing a broader commonality for the first-year student experience at UW, the initiative can be viewed as a significant step towards academic mainstreaming. Another test, therefore, would be the degree to which this is achieved over time.

## 7.3    Overview

Activities in American HEIs can draw on various 'national' datasets to supplement institutional analyses and insights. Among these are Astin's annual survey of the characteristics and views of freshers, and the more recent outputs from the National Survey of Student Engagement.

There are two final comments to make on the American evidence. First, Gardner and colleagues reported that while the first-year student experience initiatives did not set out to improve retention, this has been one outcome. The figure quoted at the 20th International Conference on the First-Year Experience was of the order of a nine per cent improvement in retention.

Secondly, it is important to reiterate the scale and diversity of the American system. As one illustration, the inter-institutional span in relation to retention statistics is much larger than occurs in the UK. The degree and nature of external influences is also different. Some states exercise significant influence on the institutions they fund. Likewise, regional accreditation bodies shape agendas. However, accreditation reports are not published documents in the USA. Furthermore, many institutions have quite high degrees of independence from state or other external controls. These significant contextual differences affect the detail within the American system and influence comparisons with other systems.

# 8 Concluding remarks and suggestions for further consideration

## 8.1 Concluding remarks

Interestingly, neither engagement nor empowerment featured prominently as terms in the subheadings of the HEA review of literature on the first-year experience (Harvey, Drew and Smith, 2006). However, extensive reference was made to at least partly correlated terms such as academic and social integration, induction, performance and retention, persistence, support and skills development. Again, while some of the material cited touched on the nature and purposes of the first year, this did not attract sustained scrutiny. Nor did the issue of the status of first-year teaching. Instead, the focus of a substantial section on learning and teaching was on approaches, conceptions and techniques. Thus it can be argued that the locus of this First Year Experience Enhancement Theme project has been distinctive. As such, it may offer findings of interest to a wide range of audiences and potential users.

Emerging developments in the Hong Kong HE system have caused institutions to deliberate carefully whether there is a need to revise the nature and purposes of the first year in the new four-year degree programmes (which are replacing the current three-year degrees). While some detail remains to be finalised, in general the widespread and careful discussions and debates within institutions indicate that some adaptations and realignment will occur. Additionally, induction and integration may need to be re-interpreted, given that in future many entrants will have pursued a different and less specialised curriculum in secondary schooling in Hong Kong.

The scale and span of development in Hong Kong makes it an interesting and unique example. On the institutional scale, the University of Melbourne in Australia is progressing a radical revision of undergraduate and master's programmes, with a three-year generally-based bachelor's degree to precede specialised professional master's programmes.

There is also much of interest in the *Findings from a Decade of National Studies* (Krause et al, 2005) and from the selected examples described in section 6 of this report. While highlighting what has been achieved in Australia, Krause et al (2005) pointed to several areas meriting further attention, such as:

- how some of the trends in Australia (for example, students' part-time employment commitments) impact on the nature of the first-year experience
- the implications of the growth of double degrees
- the balance between shaping and being shaped by student expectations
- exploring what can be done to address the desire voiced by students that they would like staff to be more available to discuss their assignments and broad study questions.

These and other topics raised in that section of the Krause et al findings may merit deliberation and reflection within Scottish HEIs.

The 2004 Australian survey (Krause et al, 2005) added new foci such as student engagement and the experiences of diverse groups. Again, while longitudinal data cannot be presented on these topics, both offer insights that may be of relevance to the Scottish setting.

The vast US system of HE provides numerous examples of initiatives. As mentioned in section 7, the National Resource Center at the University of South Carolina is a valuable resource base.

General Education requirements in the first year in America HEIs set a specific context for student integration and effective induction. Much can be learned from examining how American institutions have sought to meet these challenges, even if Scottish HEIs operating in a different context might not elect to adopt the specific organisational vehicle of, say, the University College.

That said, there are structural similarities between the integration challenges of entry into a Scottish HEI offering a broad multi-subject first year and those of many American universities and colleges. These similarities are sufficient to commend careful consideration and evaluation of American initiatives, including attempts to cultivate shared learning experiences through common reading and/or learning communities/first-year interest groups.

In a study of entrepreneurial universities, Clark (1998) argued that initiatives are often started by champions/innovators and, as such, sit on the periphery of academic endeavour. For embedding, Clark believed that incorporation into the academic heartland of the disciplines was a necessary evolution. Could that analogy apply to the first-year experience? Some initiatives that are perceived as quite successful do not sit fully within the academic heartland; rather, they are based in dedicated units or vehicles. Even when academics are directly involved, it may be on a shared-appointment basis with the relevant academic department. This seems to be a characteristic model for staffing in university colleges in the USA. How can stronger connectivity to, and greater involvement of, the whole academic community be achieved? Is this necessary, effective, efficient? These questions might feature more prominently in the next phase of discussions around this Enhancement Theme.

An effective route to academic heartlands should be through their subject communities. The outputs from the HEA Subject Centres highlighted in section 3 of this report demonstrated that some resources are available and that some priority is attached to various dimensions of the topic of the first year. It was beyond the scope of this study to explore the level of usage of the resources within Scottish HEIs, but this could usefully be pursued by institutions. Additionally, the Scottish material (section 2) revealed illustrations of discipline-based initiatives, doubtless only the tip of an iceberg. Attention could usefully be paid to wider dissemination of this information.

The status of first-year teaching is a multi-stranded and complex topic, spanning values, academic cultures and identities, organisational structures and procedures for reward, recognition and promotion. That complexity cannot be dissected here. Instead, the focus for discussion, reflection and possible action might usefully be on a more limited range of questions, such as:

- Does the organisation of first-year teaching ensure that students encounter enthusiastic, motivated staff with whom they have a realistic opportunity of creating effective learning experiences?

- Is such a role explicitly valued by individual members of staff, their departments, their school/faculty/college and their institution? If not, what actions should be taken to promote that situation?

- Is outstanding first-year teaching recognised and rewarded?

- Bearing in mind the goal of engagement and effective integration, what balance should be sought between dedicating specific teachers to first-year classes and exposing students to a wider range of teaching inputs?

- Is there a perceived hierarchy of attractiveness of teaching commitments, with teaching first-year classes to students who do not intend to proceed in that discipline seen as the least attractive option? If so, should anything be done to address this? For example, do such classes have retention problems or below-average scores in student feedback questionnaires? If so, what should be done? Perhaps the first step would be to discuss these matters with senior managers during the forthcoming engagement/dissemination phase.

Section 2 of this report presented a rich array of information from Scottish HEIs. This is not repeated here other than to highlight six points:

- Local context emerged as an important dimension.

- Institutions widely welcomed the opportunity provided by the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme to inform and encourage discussion and reflection, and were either in the process of enacting further enhancements or expected these to be progressed in 2007-08.

- Typically, these discussions had involved a wide range of individuals and groups/committees.

- Institutions had already engaged with early outputs from some Theme-related projects, and looked forward to discussing the final reports.

- Even though institutions had been working on various enhancements for some time, including some adopted from other Scottish HEIs and from beyond Scotland, the opportunity to stocktake, share and reflect was perceived positively.

- Self-assessment tools have been developed, which should inform subsequent discussions, as will analyses of various student and staff surveys and consultations.

## 8.2  Suggestions for further consideration

The Scottish Funding Council might usefully dedicate a stream of ongoing funding to the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme, perhaps for an additional period of two or three years. Specifically, this could enable institutions to progress and extend the relevant policy and practice debates and organisational cycles, taking on board (as appropriate) lessons from the current projects, reflecting on issues raised, developing adaptations of initiatives that have operated successfully elsewhere, and refining and/or revising their own practices, polices and strategies. Some developmental funding could be given to institutions and to QAA Scotland, under the guidance of a steering committee, to enable continuing developmental support and, ideally, to permit some additional targeted investigations. These might include, for example, mathematical skills and/or positive feedback, and/or the design of a staff CPD course on learning and teaching for first-year students. Additionally, further cross-sector seminars could be considered as a means of sharing and reflecting on practices.

The Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee, in the current review of Enhancement Themes, might consider the possibility that some Themes could extend over longer periods, entailing cycles of investigation, reflection, reporting, further reflection and action planning, and implementation. It could also seek ways of further strengthening connectivity between Themes. As outlined in the concluding remarks above, additional questions that have emerged from this project could also usefully be explored.

The work on this Enhancement Theme has been quite distinctive. Arguably, no comparable system-wide discussion has been initiated on this topic. Consequently, the outputs could be of considerable interest to others. Efforts should be made to lubricate a broad strategy of dissemination of the work. In addition to publication of the various project reports, the opportunity should be taken to facilitate presentations at national and international events, foster networks and assist relevant collaborations. Presumably this would entail discussions between QAA Scotland and the Scottish Funding Council. Given the growing importance of the Bologna process, emphasis might be attached to strengthening European networks and collaborations.

In a similar vein it would be desirable to maintain a website on which resources and updated reports could be lodged. Organising an online conference during 2008 should be considered as an additional activity. Enhanced cross-referencing between the Enhancement Themes and HEA websites would be beneficial.

Institutions will wish to draw from this report, and the other Theme reports, to inform internal discussions, debates and developments. It is for them to elect how that is done. Nonetheless, there would appear to be merits in considering team-based approaches, including selected opportunities for action-oriented meetings of inter-institutional teams, possibly grouped by similarity of academic profile and/or mission.

Students, facilitated by sparqs, should consider how they can develop an agenda for action arising from this report. That might fruitfully be set alongside the action agenda they define from the outputs of the other sector-wide discussion project, 'Student expectations, experiences and reflections on the first year'; sparqs has agreed to progress these matters. Likewise, institutions may find it sensible to consider the reports of these two sector-wide discussion projects in tandem.

Many of the issues and themes that emerged from the institutional reports and discussions with institutional representatives and other respondents interweaved with dimensions of staff and educational development. As one would anticipate, these postholders frequently played key roles in supporting, informing and facilitating initiatives or associated agendas. The range of actions was impressive and included: the development (at Heriot-Watt) of a framing tool for use by faculties, departments and other units; staff-student dialogues (for example, at Edinburgh); and Theme-related seminars and conferences (for example, SAC, Dundee, Strathclyde, Stirling, GSA, ECA and RGU). Educational developers were also prominent players in related cross-institutional committees and working groups. Universities Scotland's Learning and Teaching Educational Development Sub-Committee might progress some of these matters.

Many institutional respondents reported encouraging levels of staff engagement with Theme-related developmental activities, and anticipated that this would continue in the post-report phase of the Theme. They also signalled a commitment to using the outputs to inform developmental actions and strategic dialogues. Locally, staff and educational developers were often central facilitators, working in partnership with others and strategically steered by the relevant senior officer and/or university committee. Collectively these players are developing action plans for the next several months to enable institutional aspirations to be progressed. Another area for consideration stems from the issues and questions raised in the concluding remarks above. In conjunction with academic leaders, educational developers could facilitate such discussions within institutions.

Emerging agendas are likely to impinge on such discussions. For example, discussions are taking place on ways of progressing the proposals contained in the Leitch report. In the context of this Theme, the central issue would be how any actions and developments arising from implementation of the Leitch report would influence the nature and purposes of the first year. Thus the looping developmental cycles envisioned by Krause (2007a) would be likely to play out against the implications of shifting agendas, priorities and pressures.

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## Useful websites

Effective Learning Framework
www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/ELF/default.asp

First Year @ RGU
www.rgu.ac.uk/firstyear/home/page.cfm?CFID=4158196&CFTOKEN=98503468&jsession id=503129c4ec3f56156281TR

Leitch report
www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/independent_reviews/leitch_review/review_leitch_index.cfm

National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition
www.sc.edu/fye

Policy Center on the First Year of College
www.firstyear.org

Responding to Student Needs Enhancement Theme outcomes
www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/StudentNeeds/outcomes.asp

Royal Society of Chemistry
www.rsc.org/Education/HEstudents/personaldevelopment.asp

SALTIRE
www.st-andrews.ac.uk/saltire

University Grants Committee of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/ugc/index.htm

TurnitinUK
www.submit.ac.uk/static_jisc/ac_uk_index.html?session-id=0c7f714ee362deaeea
1530d7210b6c13

Turnitin
www.turnitin.com/static/index.html

# 10 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* (PDP) *in the first year*

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

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