Enhancement Themes

Things that make a difference: lessons from the Enhancement Themes

Enhancing the student
learning experience

Enhancement Themes

Things that make a difference:
lessons from the Enhancement Themes

Professor David Lines

Introduction

The unique **Scottish Quality enhancement framework** is designed to support higher education (HE) institutions to manage the quality of the student learning experience and to provide public confidence in the quality and standards of HE. **Enhancement Themes** are one element of the framework, the others being institution-led review; public information set; effective involvement of students in quality management; and Enhancement-led institutional review.

The Enhancement Themes have been organised as a five-year rolling programme designed to help Scottish institutions, both individually and collectively, to:

- address the problems and challenges inherent in twenty-first century mass and global HE
- find high quality and effective solutions to improve the student experience
- be more efficient and effective in delivering transformational change.

Taken together, the Enhancement Themes provide both a wide ranging and an in-depth analysis of what makes a difference to the student experience, drawing on research and experiences from an array of academics worldwide. This work has culminated in the Enhancement Theme for 2009 onwards, called 'Graduates for the 21st Century', reflecting both the wealth of data already accumulated by previous Themes and also the work of colleagues in HE institutions across Scotland who have actively engaged with the process.

This booklet offers a distillation of the lessons learnt from previous Enhancement Themes, taking as its guiding principle

the notion of 'making a difference' to the student experience. It can only hint at the amount of data and level of detail that exists, however. For a comprehensive view, the Enhancement Themes website (www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk) provides access to all the published material, including a *Guide to the Outcomes of the Themes* (www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/guide) that is itself a synthesis of the lessons of the previous Themes, but with more detail than that supplied below and with hyperlinks to the original documents.

The information that follows is organised, as far as possible, in a chronological order, from the time the student applies to university to graduation and beyond.

1 Making a difference: from application to enrolment

1.1 School/university transition

The matching of expectations is critical to long-term success at university. Such matching requires 'myths' and misconceptions about HE to be dispelled and in their place provided a more realistic picture of what students might expect, both academically and socially, and what might be expected of them. Close school/college/university links ensure, among other things, that there is no mismatch between what students expect from university and what actually happens when they get there.

1.2   Student diversity and personalisation

Successful personalisation strategies make a significant difference to the student experience. Planning such strategies is helped by considering the time until the entry into second year as a life cycle with eight stages: pre-entry; induction; first few weeks; first assessments; end semester one; end semester two; resits; and transition to the following year. These stages are broadly sequential, although the timing of each will vary between individuals and institutions.

A strategic approach to personalisation in the pre-entry stage of the 'student life cycle' is an acknowledgement of the individual and his or her needs, from the point of application through to enrolment. Such an approach is facilitated using tools such as pre-entry blogs; maintaining contact through a personalised web page; personalised pre-entry support; and information technology tuition designed to meet subject-specific needs.

1.3   Student expectations and choice of course

Students need to make informed and accurate decisions about their choice of university and what to study. To help them do so, pre-course information must be open and honest about academic and other requirements, including: expected study time, mathematical content, career expectations, and so on.

2   Making a difference: making the transition

2.1   Issues associated with transition

The key generic issues associated with transition to HE are: integration; its principal forms; the changing nature of the university experience; academic transition: adapting to the university experience; personal and social; geographic and administrative; and the student perspective on transition. Especially important is the need to consider the transition of different learner groups, such as working-class, first generation and mature learners, though grouping students together carries the risk of generalisation or stereotyping and institutional strategies should be aimed at all first-year students and not just those who fall into what might be termed 'at risk' categories. It is argued that personal development planning (PDP) has an important role in easing transition in that it can be a means of enabling students to gain an awareness of their own development as learners, reflect on the progress of that development, and make plans and decisions which forward their development in the direction they feel is right for them.

2.2   The type and volume of information provided at enrolment

It is critical that the information given to students at enrolment is as useful and comprehensive as possible. Just as importantly, it has to be given out as and when it is needed and in a variety of forms, not just electronically. Many students' union websites are valued, not only because

they are seen as user friendly, but also because they contain relevant and timely information.

2.3   Flexibility in curriculum and programme design

The greater diversity of today's student population requires a more flexible approach to programme and curriculum design so that a partnership develops between staff and students to determine delivery mode, pace and content of study. Flexible entry routes and flexible approaches to learning need to be addressed at the point of programme design rather than programme delivery. Given the wide-ranging use of IT, both in terms of academic development and general communication while at university, it is important that students are equipped with the necessary skills for success. The assumption that all students today are so equipped when they arrive is false, especially those who are of a different generation from school leavers.

2.4   Developing academic writing skills

The development of academic writing skills (or 'academic literacy' as it is sometimes referred to) is central to success at university. Three models have been identified by Lea and Street (1998) as means of fostering such skills, namely: 'study skills', which can be bolt-on or embedded and subject-specific or generic; 'academic socialisation' where the teaching or practising of scholarship skills uses the language of the subject discipline with some subject content (for example, in nurse education helping students to think as a nurse might think) and 'academic literacies', which is a totally embedded approach in which academic writing skills are explicitly developed within the programme.

3   Making a difference: the first year

3.1   Nature and purpose of the first year

The terms 'engagement' and 'empowerment' describe a positive approach to making a difference to the first-year experience. In particular, there are synergies that can be obtained from forging closer research-teaching links in the first year.

3.2   Induction

Every university in the Scottish HE sector has an induction programme. Having one that contains the following elements can make a real difference to the students' experience of university. Such a programme:

- is strategically located within the HE institution and managed by an authority that has the power to bring about change and drive policy on matters related to support for first-year students
- addresses academic, social and cultural adjustments required of students
- provides time-relevant targeted information
- provides early validating experiences
- is inclusive of all student groups, recognising their increasing heterogeneity, and requiring a range of approaches and a flexible system of support
- addresses special needs of particular groups
- makes academic expectations explicit
- includes teaching staff at a personal level and should be

embedded within programmes in terms of content as well as learning, teaching and assessment strategies

- develops required computing and e-learning skills
- recognises existing skills/experience
- recognises different entry points to HE
- is inclusive of students' families
- is student-centred rather than university-centred
- is an integrated whole
- is part of an ongoing extended programme
- is evaluated, both qualitatively and quantitatively, in terms of achievement and retention, with findings communicated to relevant stakeholders.

So as to avoid confusion or misunderstandings, institutions should declare a 'support entitlement' which makes clear from the outset the areas and levels of support provided for students by the institution. Underpinning this entitlement, PDP enables students to gain self-awareness as developing learners and to plan the actions that will enhance personal and career development.

Scholarship skills cannot be taken for granted in first-year students; equally, students themselves do not always recognise that the skills they have developed in other educational environments may not be fit for purpose at university. It is therefore important that both students and teachers adjust expectations and actions according; if they do then it will make a real difference to both groups.

3.3   Personalisation and the first year

Particularly in the first year, personalisation contains three elements:

- academic personalisation: dealing with learning and learning demands at/in HE

- social personalisation: dealing with being in HE and alien environments

- professional personalisation: learning with and from others (tutors and peers).

Personalisation also offers clear practical advantages in the context of the first year. It can be used to:

- counter the effects of large class sizes which have arisen in the wake of widening participation and massification of HE

- take account of the preferred learning styles of individual students

- engage and empower students by adopting pedagogies that are student centred, thus shifting the axis of power from the institution, its staff and its curricula to the individual student

- exploit the potential benefits of new electronic technologies

- address issues of transition

- maximise the benefits to the student of PDP.

In the same way that 'one size does not fit all' as far as individual students are concerned, the same can be said of HE establishments. Detailed differences and nuances matter to institutions, and to their respective academic and support communities.

3.4   Learning communities and peer support

Learning communities help to cement relationships and establish effective ways of working, which together can make a measurable difference to performance. The best of these communities have four elements in common: involvement, investment, influence and identity.

Peer support makes a significant difference to both expectations and performance. Such support can be 'explicit', that is, those frameworks and practices introduced by academic departments and support services to enable students to support each other, or implicit, that is, practices that often look like, and are, normal parts of a student's course.

Assessment and feedback processes can encourage social bonding and the development of learning communities, as well as enhancing students' motivation, self-esteem and desire to be successful.

The teaching-research nexus can help to foster a sense of belonging to a community. Certainly the idea of students as scholars supports the notion of developing distinctive graduate attributes, though that leaves the sector with the challenge of how such attributes might be assessed, especially in the context of work-based learning.

3.5   Student support and the role of the tutor

The most effective form of student support is when it is both concentrated and integrated; an approach that does not distinguish between academic and non-academic units and which is coordinated between and across services, faculties, departments, student associations and students.

Arguably, the importance of support services in the first year requires resources to be disproportionately distributed in this direction, and this might also include the allocation of an academic department's most experienced staff to teach first-year students.

PDP is a useful tool for tutorial staff. To gain the maximum benefit from PDP, staff development and training should be provided to raise awareness of its benefits, the boundaries of the tutor's role and sources of expert help within the institution.

3.6 Technology in the context of student integration

The universal adoption of Virtual learning environments (VLEs) across campuses, online applications and web pages dedicated to the first year have made a huge difference to communications, reducing students' feelings of isolation and easing accessibility to facilities.

3.7 Retention and the first year

Constant auditing and evaluation by university staff of what their courses offer ensures that any gap between what students expect and what they actually experience is closed. Similarly, personal tutor support in the early days, the most likely time to drop out, is critical, as is student/tutor communication throughout the year.

Given that poor attendance is evidence of a loss of engagement, it makes a great deal of difference to students if schools and departments monitor attendance closely so that corrective action can be taken in good time.

A number of alternative theoretical frameworks explain why some students drop out while others persevere. McInnis and James (1995) and McInnis, James and Hartley (2000), identify four 'adjustment' factors that influence integration: academic; geographic; administrative; and personal.

Arguably, there are nine preconditions for success in the first year. These are:

- helping students to come to terms with what is expected in academic study
- setting high expectations
- offering regular opportunities for formative feedback
- limiting the negative effects of summative assessment
- showing sensitivity to the diversity of students' commitments
- fostering self-responsibility for and self-regulation of learning
- enhancing motivation and a belief in an ability to succeed
- making personal contact with teachers
- forming friendship groups.

The notion of engagement and empowerment as an alternative to 'retention' opens up a new perspective on the work of authors who have consistently argued for universities to become true learning communities. Creating space within the curriculum for peer support acts as a counter to massification, but physical space also needs to be preserved, or created, and not just social space either, though that is important, but also places where students can sit and discuss and work in teams. Virtual space is crucial too, because,

with an increasing number of students off campus for long periods, a sense of belonging can be fostered online as much as in person.

3.8   Curriculum issues

It makes a difference to the first-year experience of students if the curriculum is seen strategically; as a learning experience that is active, individualised and collaborative. Such a curriculum facilitates student engagement with peers and staff and encourages the use of information and communication technology (ICT) as appropriate. It also stretches them beyond their experience of learning in school or college.

Democratising the curriculum and its assessment in the first year encourages students to have a say in the topic, method, criteria, weighting and timing of assessments as well as a contribution to the overall curriculum, assessment policy and practice.

It is valuable to allocate time and resources within the curriculum to PDP discussion and activities to ease new students into the first year. Prior experience of and exposure to PDP should be recognised, as well as the possibility that such experience might have been good or bad. In this respect, peer mentoring opportunities can be expanded as a support mechanism, and as a way of introducing the product or the support used (most often e-portfolios).

Careers staff can make a significant difference by assisting students to clarify goals, which can help them engage in the process, especially where courses are not overtly vocational. This process can be further assisted by the production of student-facing publications focusing on PDP.

3.9   Assessment and feedback in the first year

It makes a huge difference to students to know, as soon as possible, how well (or badly) they are doing academically. To that end, early formative tasks for diagnostic purposes, especially in those courses with a high mathematical content, are essential. Not only do these tests help students to recognise what is required of them outside the stressful environment of a 'high stakes' summative examination, they also provide staff with feedback on teaching and learning. More generally, assessment tasks should be designed to be as congruent with the backgrounds and aspirations of an increasingly diverse student population as possible.

A further advantage offered by early, diagnostic tests is that they can be used to teach academic expectations and conventions through tasks that focus on important issues, like academic writing that avoids plagiarism; reading analytically and using appropriate ways to structure information. Feedback can be given in groups or by peers, but speed is vital. Overall, it is not only important that feedback acts as 'feedforward', helping students to self-assess and self-correct, but also that there is sufficient space and time in which to do so. Such a process encourages interaction and dialogue around learning, peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher.

PDP has a role in both pedagogy and assessment, but this role may be unrecognised unless it is clearly articulated to students. Furthermore, if some part or all of the PDP is to be assessed, the process of reflection becomes more complex and a part of a wider academic literacies perspective.

Assessment tasks should be designed to encourage time and effort on challenging learning tasks; those which require regular study in and out of class and which promote deep

rather than surface learning. Such tasks must have very clear guidelines for students, so they do not have to guess what is required.

3.10 Student feedback on their first-year experience

It makes a difference to students if the feedback they give at the end of the year is used effectively to enhance the experience of those who follow. 'You said, we did' posters are a good way of making clear that the institution has listened to the feedback and acted upon it.

4 Making a difference: from end of first year to graduation

4.1 The curriculum

Customised programmes make a real difference to today's more heterogeneous student population. A continuum of flexibility, in terms of time, place, content, and mode of learning and assessment implies a partnership between staff and learners, with greater student choice and autonomy. This in turn reflects a growing student awareness of individualised learning, which is itself founded on indications of interdisciplinarity in many programmes. The implications for assessment in all this are that it too must be flexible and inclusive for all students, including those from non-traditional backgrounds.

The whole curriculum is something that extends beyond formal classroom experiences. For instance, there is an increasing emphasis on employability, one that requires a changing mindset on the part of staff, students and employers. Such an emphasis encompasses issues surrounding personal transferable skills or graduate attributes: what they are; how they might be developed in students; what their place is, or should be, in the curriculum; how they might be taught and then assessed; and finally the ways in which learning such skills should be represented.

4.2   Teaching, learning and technology

Because each individual is unique, the more the learning experience can be personalised, the greater the difference it will make. Personalising the learning environment encourages a learner-centred approach to become the prevailing pedagogy, and also increases the number of students taking responsibility for their own learning. Consistent with this emphasis is the use of e-portfolios for formative self-assessment and self-diagnosis, and emerging social software tools on the Internet, such as weblogs, podcasting and wikis. ICT offers the potential for a non-linear approach to information gathering and processing and thus different routes through, and forms of, learning. Alongside these changes are developments in mobile phone technology and PDAs that facilitate more integration and 'just for me' information for students, especially those with disabilities.

VLEs have been shown to make a real difference to the learning environment. Content-based approaches are increasingly sophisticated (that is, use of video streaming parts of lectures and critical incidents; digitised materials from Higher Education Resources on Demand (HERON) service; simulations and virtual experiences of labs and field trips, and

so on), while in the context of assessment they allow repeated attempts at mastering the same information, somewhat in the same manner as the hierarchies of increasing difficulty in a PC game. Furthermore, electronic interaction with staff via email is more targeted and therefore more likely to lead to enhanced learning outcomes.

4.3   Assessment

Formative assessment tasks provide students with invaluable feedback and feedforward. These tests make a considerable difference, both to students' performance and enjoyment of the learning experience, especially if innovative assessment methods are used.

A strategy designed to rebalance assessment of and for learning contains four elements:

- feedforward assessments that provide indicators that help improve future performance
- cumulative coursework
- better understood expectations and standards
- speedy feedback.

In order to improve students' academic performance, it is essential that they develop a good grasp of what counts as high-quality work in a given subject and at a given level. However, making explicit to students the criteria used to assess their progress and performance, valuable though that is, is not in itself enough to help them to come to hold 'a concept of quality roughly similar to that held by the teacher' (Sadler 1989). That requires interactive briefings with students about assessment expectations and requirements, which include asking them to generate their own criteria for

assessing an unfamiliar task, and offering them training in evaluating their own and others' work.

Students should be encouraged to learn from their mistakes, on the basis that we learn as much, if not more, from getting things wrong as we do from getting them right (assuming our errors are explained). Computer-aided assessment (CAA) is especially effective in this area since it is seen as an unthreatening environment for students and one that can provide instant, high-quality feedback.

4.4   Feedback on assessment

High quality assessment feedback makes a significant difference to enhancing the student experience. Seven broad principles of good feedback practices have been identified. They are that it should:

- facilitate the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning
- encourage teacher and peer dialogue around learning
- help clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, and expected standards)
- provide opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance
- deliver high quality information to students about their learning
- encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem
- provide information to staff that can be used to help shape teaching.

Although feedback is highly desirable and does make a difference, students often 'look at the mark and not at the

comment'. One way to increase their desire for feedback is to use the following:

- provide feedback that allows them to compare themselves with their peers in non-threatening ways
- focus on formative rather than summative feedback
- leverage the power of peers
- encourage staff to examine their own demand for and willingness to seek external feedback
- use rituals to establish high expectations.

Technology is highly effective in improving individualised feedback on assessment. Examples include using CAA within a formative assessment context, exploiting this 'low stakes' environment as a way of providing instant feedback in an unthreatening way.

Using diagnostic assessment is another way of making a difference to the learning experience, especially for discovering levels of ICT and study skills and thus enhancing the targeting of individualised support. In this context PDPs are helpful.

4.5   Making assessment more effective and efficient

Instead of assessment being something that is 'done to' students, involving them in its creation means that they will buy into it and recognise its value as part of the learning process. Strategies to achieve this end include involving them in establishing assessment criteria; the use of peer assessment and computer-aided learning (CAL), as well as surveys of

students' experience of assessment to provide feedback on what has, and what has not worked.

It is important to recognise that the students' context (cultural, social and economic) makes a difference to their approach to and aptitude for certain assessment tasks. For example, it will be helpful to know whether they:

- have studied the subject before, and how well they did
- are likely to take further courses in the future
- live on or off campus
- have a job in term-time
- come from an English-speaking background.

In order to enhance the assessment experience effectively, it is necessary to focus on areas of known student concern, that is, where past evaluations have indicated student discontent with the provision of guidance and feedback, make use of items from existing resources, such as the FAST inventory (Formative Assessment in Science Teaching Project), Weaver's (2006) questionnaire, or a typology of potential trouble spots in guidance and feedback to probe the issue more searchingly.

Particularly where teaching and assessment responsibilities are spread across a large and diverse course team (for example mainstream lecturers, postgraduate teaching assistants, part-time tutors or demonstrators) it is important to survey staff as well as student experiences and perceptions of assessment so that feedback can be obtained from a number of angles and perceptions.

5 Making a difference: graduate attributes, employability and lifelong learning

5.1 Graduate attributes

Although graduate attributes are difficult to define, broadly they are 'the skills, knowledge and abilities of university graduates, beyond disciplinary knowledge, which are applicable to a range of contexts' (Barrie 2004, p 262). Arguably, they are what makes HE different from other forms or levels of learning and therefore their acquisition is what everyone involved should be working towards.

A systematic or strategic approach to embedding research-teaching linkages and thence to certain attributes recognises a progression from years one to four of an undergraduate programme; uses assessment regimes that help students to develop and articulate research-based graduate attributes; and promotes employability by making skills more transparent. Institutional structural mechanisms, such as course approval procedures, encourage and monitor research-teaching linkages, which in turn focus staff on the need to develop greater connectedness.

5.2   Assessment and employability

An awareness of what will be expected of students in their working lives beyond graduation implies assignments that not only help to stretch and define what students know, understand and can do, but also prepare them for future employability.

5.3   Employability and the co-curriculum

Emphasising the use, application and recognition of work done by students in the 'co-curriculum' makes a significant difference to a student's wider commitment to his or her institution. In this context, personal transferable skills are important, both in terms of what they are and also how they might be assessed.

5.4   Career guidance and technology

Career planning makes an enormous difference to employability and ultimately to a student's view of university. To be effective, such planning should be integrated into the mainstream curriculum using web-based resources for careers guidance, including interactive careers materials and self-help career tools, such as online tutorials and job searches. Another way of emphasising the centrality of employability is to insert career-planning components of accredited PDP modules as core or optional modules in programmes of study.

6   References

Barrie, S (2004) A research-based approach to generic graduate attributes policy, *Higher Education Research & Development*, volume 23, issue 3

Lea, M and Street, B (1998) Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach, *Studies in Higher Education*, volume 23, issue 2, pp 157-172

McInnis, C and James, R (1995) *First Year on Campus*, Canberra: Australian Government Publication Service

McInnis, C, James, R and Hartley, R (2000) *Trends in the First Year Experience*, Canberra: Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs

Sadler, D R (1989) Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems, *Instructional Science*, issue 18, pp 119-144

Weaver, M (2006) Do students value feedback? Student perceptions of tutors' written responses, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, volume 31, Issue 3, pp 379-394

QAA Scotland
183 St Vincent Street
Glasgow
G2 5QD

Tel   0141 572 3420
Fax   0141 572 3421
Email   enhancement@qaa.ac.uk
Web   www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk