

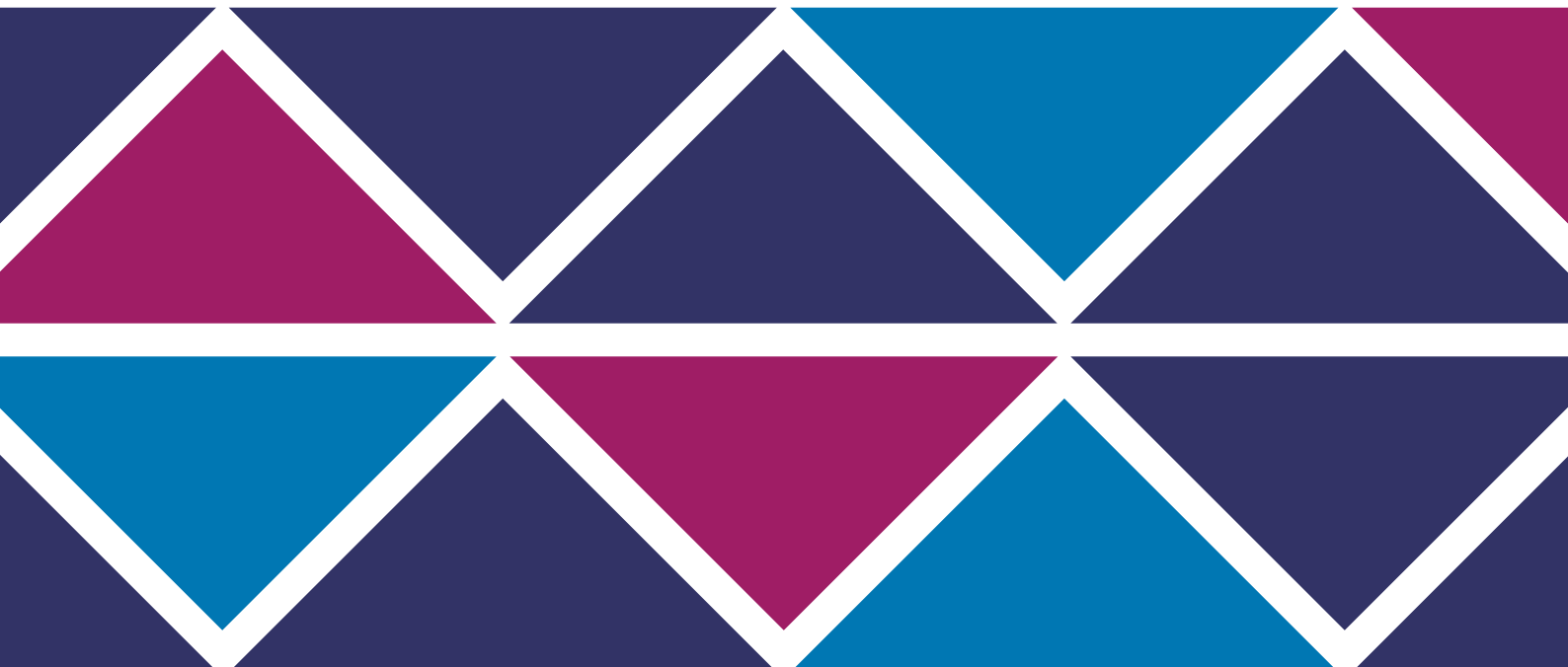


An Evaluation of 20 Years of the Enhancement Themes 2003-23

Executive Summary

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Executive summary

The following synopsis highlights key points within the full evaluation report, alongside providing recommendations for various stakeholders in the sector under the calls to action banner. For more forensic analysis of the detail provided here, please access the [main report](#).

Overview

This evaluation has taken place from 2020 to 2023 in the Scottish higher education (HE) sector and occurred whilst the world was undergoing the COVID-19 global pandemic. QAA Scotland (QAAS) commissioned the work in 2020 in order to understand and be able to show what difference the Enhancement Themes approach has made, in Scotland and beyond. The primary aim of the evaluation was to identify the impact of the 20 years of Enhancement Themes' activity on the student experience. This includes the latest Resilient Learning Communities Theme, so that it would be possible to identify ways in which the student experience has improved, as well as recognising the enhancements to policy and practice in the higher education sector. One cautionary note for the reader concerns recognising that when the Themes' work first started in 2003, little was known about explicit evaluation of effectiveness in the HE sector. There was no formal 'language' of evaluation or knowledge concerning the importance of outcomes, let alone Theories of Change.

Analysis and findings

A theory-driven methodology was utilised whilst adopting a participatory approach (Kara 2020) to data gathering, framed by integrative review methodology deemed appropriate for this type of evaluation (Coren and Fisher, 2006). Data-gathering activities included: secondary analysis of documentary sources, including qualitative and quantitative gap mapping; primary data gathered through observation; and focus groups and email interviews with key stakeholders within and beyond the Scottish HE sector. An Expert Reference Group (ERG) was convened for the duration to provide additional layers of evidence contribution and triangulation, comprising individuals who had a distinct connection to the Scottish sector, alongside those with evaluation expertise nationally and internationally.

The evaluation of impact over 20 years of the Enhancement Themes (ET) required a retrospective approach, given the dearth of access to recognised evaluation information across the earlier period. Hence, contribution analysis (see TASO 2022) was identified as the most appropriate approach to analysis of impact. This approach starts with a Theory of Change process, which is co-created with key stakeholders to identify key causal logic chains. These are designed to deliberately test assumptions and to consider associated risks. From this work a Contribution Story was established which presents evidence gleaned from the 20 years of the Enhancement Themes to support, or refute, the following causal logic underpinning probable assumptions, or explanations (known as Contribution Summaries):

- 1. Can the ET evidence that the ownership of, and engagement in, each ET by staff and students within institutions and across the Scottish sector creates an infrastructure for to enable collaboration and sharing of good practice?**
- 2. Can the ET evidence that collaboration and sharing across the sector leads to enhancements on behaviours for institutions, the sector, staff and students?**
- 3. Can the ET evidence that changing behaviours of institutions, the sector, staff and students leads to improved student learning experiences and outcomes?**

Regarding 1 above, concerning ownership engagement and infrastructure to enable collaboration, there is particularly strong evidence of the varied systems and process which have been created to facilitate enhancement activity, and the resulting impact on collaboration and sharing of outputs (see section 4 of main report for more detailed analysis).

Concerning assumption 2, there is clear evidence indicating that collaboration and sharing of good practice are key features of the Scottish ETs. Direct student involvement in Themes activity has led to changes in institutional strategies, policies and practices. The specific impact on staff and students is most likely to be evidenced in recent ETs, suggesting a trajectory of engagement and evaluative reflection.

Regarding assumption 3, this is very much work in progress: whilst there are several examples of perceived, probable, or very likely impact facets indicating that there might be an explicit link between ET work and student outcomes, the causal contribution between ET activity and student experience and outcomes is still primarily implicit. This does not mean that this evidence does not exist. Indeed, the Resilient Learning Communities Theme analysis (see section 3) shows a markedly increased capability for designing evaluations and for measuring impact. The occurrence of this type of evidence in more recent Themes is indicative of a positive trend in impact reporting and in evidencing this assumption fully in the near future.

Calls to action

As a result of this longitudinal evaluation, there are some noteworthy recommendations for staff and students, institutions and the Scottish sector alike. More detail is in the main report:

For staff and students:

- the development of meaningful student engagement in Theme activity, Theme leadership and institutional strategic priorities should be continued whilst developing overall awareness in the wider student body
- to continue to develop learning, a range of sources of expertise and advocacy to encourage agency should be sought and made accessible to Scottish staff and students
- a strategy for resource creation and commissioned activity is necessary to ensure optimum impact
- the ET should encourage and support exploration of the impact of innovative practice on student experiences and outcomes
- engagement in the ET has the potential to benefit individuals' professional development but must be balanced with institutional and sector priorities.



For higher education institutions:

- making connections between ETs should enable sustained and continuous learning within institutions and across the sector
- ET activity should be clearly promoted and integrated at all levels within institutions to enable cross-institution awareness and avoid siloed engagement or pockets of activity
- institutions should continue to actively create a coherent infrastructure to enable the outcomes of the ET to be realised. Given the abundance of systems and process for engagement, collaboration and sharing, but the lack of evidence on proportionality, it is recommended that these are evaluated to ensure effectiveness
- dedicated systems and processes for evaluation and impact reporting are also recommended as importance additions
- institutions should continue to encourage the engagement of staff in the ET beyond the known and active engagers to further develop institutional enhancement cultures
- institutional and sector-level ET activity should be theorising how activities will impact on student outcomes and then measuring this theorised change against various student outcomes
- within the latest Theme analysis, evidence demonstrates that enhancement work should be aligned, or at least considered holistically, with wider strategic change (or refresh) at institution or sector level. This ensures that effectively 'proportionate' resources will be allocated accordingly. Moreover, senior leaders with wide spheres of influence will engage and thought-lead the importance concerning the rationale for change and accompanying interventions. This 'critical mass' approach can drive better engagement and impact, alongside resourcing.



For the Scottish sector:

- the Themes should be created/structured so that longer-term impact assessment can be conducted and reported
- ensuring that ET activities align with institutional strategic priorities can make sure that activities and outputs are valued and then completed. However, alignment and integration of ET activity to strategy can impact on visibility of the ET and therefore awareness, ownership and leadership are essential for reaching an effective critical mass at a sector level
- senior leaders should consider and agree meta-evaluation processes at the outset to ensure conformity regarding outcomes effectiveness at all strategic and operational levels
- in light of changes to the Scottish sector, future ETs will need to be inclusive of the experiences of all institutions to ensure relevance across the Scottish tertiary sector
- cross-sector enhancement activity should preserve the embedded ethos of collaboration and sharing of good practice
- given the abundance of systems and process for engagement, collaboration and sharing, it is recommended that these are evaluated to ensure optimum effectiveness
- the ETs should encourage and support the exploration of the impact of innovative practice on student experiences and outcomes. Collaboration and sharing across the Scottish sector have benefited individual institutions and provide a robust rationale for informed institutional change. This is an important step in decision-making and should continue to be an aim of the ET
- the Scottish sector has developed a reputation for enhancement which is admired and is globally influential. During a period of change in Scotland, the sector could consider learning from known international contacts concerning a tertiary approach.

Find out more

You can read the [full evaluation report](#) on the QAA Scotland website.

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