Evaluation of the Impact of the Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme

May 2024

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About this report

Drawing on reporting from institutions, collaborative clusters and QAA-managed sector-level projects, this report provides an overview of the range of activity and impacts delivered through the QAA Resilient Learning Communities (RLC) Enhancement Theme (ET). The RLC Enhancement Theme was a three-year programme of activity designed and delivered by Scottish universities and QAA, with a focus on meeting the changing needs and values of an increasingly diverse student community and a rapidly changing external environment.

Drawing on a variety of examples, this report highlights the impact of the RLC Theme that will be of interest to learners, to staff, and to institutions across the Scottish sector.

What difference has the Theme made?

The Resilient Learning Communities Theme spanned the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated lockdowns and had significant impact in helping institutions pivot learning, teaching and assessment strategies in 2020 and move to a blended approach in 2021-22. The Theme helped develop understanding of community and sense of belonging for students during the pandemic experience. It did not set out to do this as originally designed pre-pandemic but was significant in supporting institutions to work together to shape their responses.

> **This Theme has had significant impact across a range of areas linking to the Theme's five key questions:**
>
> ➢ What will our learning communities look like by 2023? And what can we do now to prepare for them?
>
> ➢ Who are our current and future students and how will they want to learn? How can we gain a clear understanding of their needs? What information do we need to enable us to best support their learning?
>
> ➢ How can we capitalise as a sector on the attributes students bring?
>
> ➢ How do we ensure we are able to support our diverse learning communities? What might this mean for our staff and our infrastructure?
>
> ➢ How should we anticipate, influence and respond to the changing external environment? How can we engage with our stakeholders and ensure we are influencing strategy and policy - both in Scotland and beyond?

Over the three years of the RLC Theme, learning communities were shaped profoundly by the impact of a global pandemic. The rapid move to digital delivery for learning and teaching, and student support functions, has changed student and staff expectations and consequently a more blended approach has been established. Underpinning this delivery transformation was both a willingness and resilience of staff and students to adapt, alongside developments in governance and decision-making structures and data capabilities to effect rapid change. The Theme has helped us to understand the learning that can be applied to managing future disruption.

Theme activity raised awareness and a more nuanced understanding of the needs of different student groups and students with differing characteristics, and also how the timing of focused interventions enables more effective approaches and support. For example, by understanding students' developmental needs pre-arrival and meeting those needs during studies. Projects which focused on institutional change were more likely to evidence impact

on the student body as a whole. Co-created and participatory approaches of relevance to institutional context were reported as most effective in developing impact.

An increasing number of student interns benefitted from activity across the RLC Theme by harnessing a strong and authentic student voice and engagement. Most evidence of impact for students was for those directly involved in the delivered interventions, which included impact on student satisfaction and experience with the intervention and specific development of skills and confidence and employability. There were also institutional reflections on the associated improvement on students' sense of belonging to their institution and within the sector.

An increased focus on developing evaluation capability has helped to identify the impact of enhancement activity. Through a deeper understanding, what is effective in supporting diverse learning communities, staff and infrastructure can be aligned accordingly.

Through nomination and achievement of sector-level awards and dissemination of practice across the sector, the RLC can be perceived as responding to the changing external environment. Key policy impacts include the revision of the national Recognition of Prior Learning Framework for Scotland. The Scottish Tertiary Education Network for Micro-credentials has been established as a result of the Theme and could play a role in supporting a pilot National Micro-credential Framework and Delivery Plan for Scotland. In wider dissemination of the Theme's work, and collaborative activity, the Scottish sector has engaged with international higher education organisations, influencing practices to enhance student experience and outcomes globally. Student co-design, co-creation and students as partners (with partner students' associations or through intern/champion schemes) were referenced specifically by institutions as a key activity for enabling outcomes. By demonstrating short, medium and long-term impact, the sector can have more influence over strategy and policy.

The overarching topics of the Theme changed over its three-year duration leading to different emphasis on the following strands as the Theme progressed: Community and Belonging; Supporting Staff and Student Success; Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; and

Flexible, Accessible Learning. Figure 1 lists the collaborative clusters and QAA sector-managed projects comprising the Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme.

The exceptional challenges over the duration of the Theme had a considerable effect in shaping collective activity and particularly institutions' Theme activities, as efforts were focused initially on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and then on the cost-of-living crisis.

Institutions completed work across a range of activity - from large-scale, institution-wide, multi-year single topic projects to shorter, small-scale, local-level projects. Most institutions engaged across this spectrum of activity, exploring topics and issues aligning with their strategic priorities. In many cases, institutional projects explored two or more of the key Theme questions and there were many inter-relationships between institutional projects, collaborative clusters[1] and QAA sector-managed projects.

As you read through this publication, we hope you are inspired by what was achieved by staff and students working together at a time of enormous challenge.

More detail on the external evaluation of the Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme and 20 years of the Enhancement Themes can be found in the major evaluation report from Professor Stella Jones-Devitt and Professor Liz Austen.

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[1] Groups of institutions working together on topics of mutual interest

Figure 1: Resilient Learning Communities' four topic strands and related projects

Community and belonging	Supporting staff and student success	Equality, diversity and inclusion	Flexible, accessible learning
Personalised Approaches to Resilience and Community (C)	Addressing the Digital Divide (S)	Anti-Racist Curriculum (S)	Valuing and Recognising Prior Learning and Experience (S)
Re-Imagining Resilience for Taught Postgraduate Students (C)	Supporting Student Transitions in Session 2021-22 (S)	Supporting New Scots (S)	Understanding micro-credentials and small qualifications in Scotland (S)
Programme Leadership: Strengthening Resilience, Supporting Learning Communities (C)	Mind the Gap? College Students' Experience of University (C)	Decolonising the Curriculum in the Time of Pandemic (C)	
Resilient Academic Leadership: An Exploration within the Principal Fellows Network (C)	Scottish Sector Learning from COVID-19 (S)	Promoting the Equity of the Student Learning Experience (SLP)	
Digital Student Communities (SLP)	Student Mental Wellbeing within our BAME and LGBTQ+ Learner Communities (C)		
Exploring Community Partnerships for the Future of Further and Higher Education (SLP)			

C=Collaborative Cluster Project; S= QAA sector-managed project; SLP= Student-Led Project

Student contribution to Theme activity

Engagement and partnership working with students has featured strongly throughout the Theme with many institutions reporting on activity led by student interns, or with contribution from student interns. From taught undergraduates to PhD candidates, the student intern role has been fulfilled by, and benefitted from, the participation of a range of students. There is direct benefit to the interns through skills development and engendering a sense of belonging and community.

More indirectly, the wider student body and institutions benefit because interns can harness strong and authentic student engagement. In addition to students' institutional work, the sector-level Student-Led Project activity has delivered three, year-long projects: Digital Student Communities; Promoting the Equity of the Student Learning Experience; and Exploring Community Partnerships for the Future of Further and Higher Education. There are several examples in this publication highlighting the way students benefit from Enhancement Themes engagement.

Institutional Theme activity and impact

Further details on institutions' activities can be found in individual institutional reports.

Digital developments

The disruptive force of the pandemic hastened what would have been a natural evolution of institutions' digital strategies, bringing this forward at an accelerated rate. Some examples of institutions' digital projects and activity follow and impacts they have reported includes:

- changes to strategy, policy and practice
- increased awareness and collaboration among staff and students
- a sense of shared ownership of the virtual learning environment and associated learning technologies
- empowering staff and increasing staff confidence; student surveys reporting a decrease in comments on staff difficulties with technologies
- fostering a sense of community and collegiality
- an improvement in pass rates among students from the most deprived areas.

Artificial intelligence has rapidly become another test of the sector's resilience and the response of institutions to its threats and opportunities started to emerge at the end of the Theme.

- At **Edinburgh Napier University**, an institutional project - 'Digital Support Partnership (DSP)' - aimed to support diverse learning communities through a multifaceted approach. Enabling effective online learning and teaching practices - which were crucial in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, prioritising inclusivity to ensure that no student was left behind in the transition to online learning, was a core project objective. The project resulted in a significant change in the University's approach to teaching and learning, with the shift towards online delivery reflected in the adaptation of strategies, policies and practices. The project led to increased awareness and collaboration through the establishment of cross-university groups and forums for sharing expertise and practices. The Digital Support Partnership empowered staff and also fostered a sense of community and collegiality. Resources and training provided by the DSP increased staff confidence in online teaching. In student surveys, there was a decrease in comments on staff difficulties with technologies. Student outcomes were maintained across the University throughout the transition to emergency remote teaching and there was an improvement in pass rates among students from the most deprived areas.

- **Robert Gordon University's** 'Digital Learning Environment' project aimed to improve the online learning and teaching experience for both staff and students and support the 'Future of Teaching and Learning and Assessment' project implementation. There have been a number of positive outcomes from the project. Inclusion of School-based online learning staff in decision-making and testing processes improved collaboration and supported a sense of shared ownership of the virtual learning environment and associated learning technologies. During project evaluation, academic staff involved in pilots have commented on the increasing feedback and positive response from students. *PowerBI* reports show accessibility data insights are now routinely shared with academic Schools to support review, planning and implementation of accessibility enhancement. Participation in online accessibility training events organised in collaboration with each academic School has contributed to improved accessibility scores as measured via Blackboard Ally. Blackboard Ally data also shows the increased download and use of alternative versions by students demonstrating the provision of a more inclusive online learning experience.

- A **University of St Andrews'** project investigated the impact of online learning during the pandemic - a longitudinal survey of all students asking them to reflect on their teaching and learning experiences in: 2020-21 (fully online learning); 2021-22 (hybrid learning); and 2022-23 (in-person learning) to support changing key practices and policies where needed. There was a high survey participation rate and a number of subsequent key practices and policy changes: compulsory lecture recording; timetabling management (for example, which classes should have in-person priority); and presentation of findings at multiple local and international conferences.

- At the **University of Dundee**, a number of activities working in parallel has led to an emerging internal and external network that has increased collaborative activity with staff becoming more confident and supported in developing enhanced teaching, learning and assessment activities. The activities were: the establishment of a 'Positive steps with artificial intelligence (AI)' series of recorded workshops and resources for staff; establishment of a university-wide steering group; contribution to a nationwide university working group; and collaboration with a local college.

Belonging and community

Activities and projects around belonging and community featured strongly in institutions' work as students and staff moved rapidly online. As the appetite and expectations of students on different modes of delivery are still very fluid, institutions and students' associations/unions have sought to establish and maintain ways for students to develop a sense of community and belonging when social distancing prevented in-person activities. At the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, the work on community and belonging expanded as institutions put in place measures to support students with the cost-of-living crisis - for example, in providing free or low-cost food and social activities.

Work from previous Enhancement Themes proved to be valuable legacy resources (for example, the Distance and Sense of Belonging collaborative cluster) and the Student Learning Project in Year 1 of the Theme (Digital Student Communities) brought students together to focus proactively on aspects of community and belonging.

Reducing loneliness and isolation, helping students find the right supporting resources and influencing strategic approaches to learning community are some of the impacts reported by institutions through the following projects:

- The **Open University in Scotland's** 'Big Blether' series is aimed at collaborative working with students to ensure student voice positively impacts on learning and teaching experience, maximising student success. Events were open to all Scottish students. The impact has been an increase in registration and attendance numbers across the three-year cycle. The overall satisfaction with the event remaining at high 80% and above. Feedback shows increase in the awareness of resources available to students and there is a correlation in increased numbers of students using the services promoted at the events (mental health and wellbeing resources, careers and employability resources, study skills resources). Analysis of the registration/attendance indicated a number of students coming back to the session, which supports the project's community aim.

- **Queen Margaret University's** 'Thank Goodness It's Thursday' (TGIT)' initiative, aimed at building a strong community, and supported the University's students during the cost-of-living crisis. Weekly events for students on campus offered free hot meals, take-home meal packs and a themed social activity. Feedback from student participants has been overwhelmingly positive in terms of comments about levels of loneliness and isolation among the student body and identifying the University as a supportive institution.

- **Scotland's Rural College** (SRUC)'s student-led 'Developing Student Societies' project aimed at undertaking a review of non-SRUC approaches and of the literature, and working with students to explore how to involve more students in setting up societies/communities of practice. The project had different impacts over the duration of the project - for example, in the first phase impact included facilitated development of a business case to trial a Students' Association Community Coordinator position; development of partnership between SRUC and SRUC Students' Association (SRUCSA) in the joint student-led research; and development of skills, sense of belonging and appetite to engage further in the student interns. In the second phase, partnership between SRUCSA Co-Presidents and students, building further SRUCSA community and partnership between certain societies and other organisations (for example, the Foraging Society and NatureScot, OWLs and a local high school) were developed. In the third phase, students reported that they felt comfortable joining new societies; that 'they belong'.

- The **University of Stirling's** project on 'Learning community - understanding what makes a resilient learning community' was an appreciative enquiry project aiming to better understand what the concept of resilient learning communities means to students and staff, which was used to shape the University's new Learning and Teaching Strategy, focusing on relationships; learning and teaching activities; and learning and teaching environment. Different aspects within this included: pre-arrival and transition workshops; Students' Union student mentoring scheme (Steer); and buddying through the Students' Union Pandemic Pals initiative, which raised awareness of the Enhancement Theme across the University and also addressed concerns about isolation in the context of Covid and welcoming students into the learning community. Recommendations incorporated into the University's new Learning and Teaching Strategy (publication 2023) means that the project has influenced the University's approach to learning community throughout the forthcoming strategy period.

Mental wellbeing and loneliness

The twin effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and financial pressures have increased feelings of isolation and loneliness with students' in-person social activities being negatively impacted. Several institutions prioritised work to better understand these far-reaching issues. While the Student Mental Wellbeing within our BAME and LGBT+ Learner Communities collaborative cluster focused work on two minority groups, the work generated widely applicable lessons - for example, around teaching, learning and assessment approaches encompassing compassion and kindness. Institutional projects and activities focused on this topic have reported positive impact as improved wellbeing - for example, a decrease in students reporting negative feelings and experiences:

- **Queen Margaret University's** 'Lonely Learning & Learning to be Lonely' project aimed to identify key issues around loneliness and isolation, raising awareness, and signposting students and staff to available resources. The project to date has: raised awareness of the experience of loneliness and isolation; enhanced understanding of the means by which these can be managed; developed resources to mitigate loneliness and isolation where they are felt to be detrimental to the individual;

produced two peer-reviewed publications (under review) and four conference and poster presentations; delivered training for newly appointed Student Champions in designing and delivering focus groups and gaining ethics approval, leading to upskilling and capacity building for the future among the student body; and video resources created by other students to capture approaches to coping with loneliness and social isolation, with plans to curate a future webpage to showcase outputs from the project.

- A project aimed at understanding and addressing the challenges faced by **Glasgow Caledonian University's** students (and other staff groups) around health and wellbeing, learner transition and staff resilience, has helped the University understand the scope of the challenge it faces and have begun to provide potential solutions. There is evidence of efficacy of the 'Snack-size self-care' pilot and the University hopes to reappraise and refine for potential wider-scale deployment.

- At the **University of the Highlands and Islands**, a project aimed at supporting student resilience through learning, teaching and assessment activities led to collated and upgraded staff and student-facing resources related to student mental health and wellbeing, including self-study mental health modules for postgraduate research students and their supervisors. Events have focused on different aspects of student resilience and ways in which these might be supported: career resilience; psychological resilience; and resilience through learning and teaching. The range of resources and events has addressed different aspects of the University's student community: postgraduate research students, online students and students within different disciplines. The immediate impact has been good staff uptake of resources and events and feedback on their usefulness has been positive.

- At **Edinburgh Napier University**, a project aiming on understanding and responding to students' learning needs, particularly in terms of wellbeing and the financial aspects of student life, resulted in: the continuation of the student buddy system; the production of printed and online resources for student wellbeing and cost-of-living support; and the establishment of the Edinburgh Napier Students' Association Community Pantry.

- The **University of St Andrew's** storytelling project helped students to express, through a creative medium, what learning during the pandemic had been like for them in hybrid learning and in-person learning environments. Over 100 detailed, candid student experiences were obtained over a two-week period. Implemented over two academic years, the qualitative evidence showed changes in students' feelings and experiences (for example, negative experiences have decreased and positive experiences have increased). The findings have been presented at local and international conferences.

Building resilience

With resilience a core part of the Enhancement Theme, this aspect appeared in the work of several institutions and incorporated a much-needed view on staff resilience. Exploring aspects of staff and student resilience was supported by the work of three collaborative cluster projects: Re-imagining Resilience for Taught Postgraduate Students; Programme Leadership: Strengthening Resilience, Supporting Learning Communities; and Resilient Academic Leadership: an Exploration within the Principal Fellows Network.

Exploring resilience has led to a better understanding of what resilience means in different contexts: for staff; for students; in different subject areas; career resilience; psychological resilience; and resilience through learning and teaching. Institutional project work has surfaced the key components of resilience for success, teaching teams good communication, sharing of the load and respect for others. Resources to develop skills to overcome academic and personal challenges, anxiety and pressure has been one aspect of student-focused work.

Increasing student confidence has been a positive impact reported in institutional work on research student peer mentoring.

- A project at the **University of Aberdeen** aiming to enhance the academic resilience of advanced entry students has led to the development of a toolkit of resources. The level of engagement in the wider sector has been very positive and resulted in an authored textbook chapter and research presented at internal and external conferences. In another, local-level project, the University of Aberdeen aimed to investigate how postgraduate students develop essential resilience skills to efficiently overcome academic and personal challenges, anxiety and pressure, by evaluating their learning experience and expectations. Learning from the project's focus group and survey activity has been used to guide academic approaches to teaching and supporting MSc Psychology programme students.

- A suite of projects at the **University of Dundee** has focused on resilience. A student-led action learning project to support resilience for student nurses has resulted in greater understanding of resilience during and post-pandemic. The increased peer interaction informed construction and piloting of a resilience building tool. Establishment of a student peer supported resilience resource - using postcards (physical and digital) providing advice and direction for support, managed by the Students' Association - resulted in focused activity and has been shared university-wide. Research of student traumatic experiences through forensic exposure provided clearer understanding of student needs and informed mental wellbeing elements integrated into module content for all forensic students.

- At **Heriot-Watt University**, 'Building Resilient Teaching Teams' has been supported through two projects. Driving enhancement in learning and teaching through a Programme Director's Forum has led to diverse participation in the Forum from across all campuses and Schools. New Action Learning Sets resources have been well

received and used. In addition, the 'Welcome Project' aimed to identify the key social and psychological components required for successful teaching teams and these have been surfaced as good communication, sharing the load and respect for others.

- At the **University of Strathclyde**, a 'Thesis Mentoring Programme Pilot' created a formalised PGR/PDRA network, emphasising peer-to-peer learning and supported by activities and opportunities outside of the individualised peer mentoring, aimed to examine the impact of mentoring of postgraduate resilience and thesis completion. Two-thirds of postgraduate research student mentees involved in the pilot programme felt that their personal resilience was enhanced by participation, alongside additional feedback from PDRAs of having more confidence in supervision and supporting postgraduate research students.

Equality, diversity and inclusion

At sector level, equality, diversity and inclusion activity focused on the three-year Anti-Racist Curriculum project and the Decolonising the Curriculum in the Time of Pandemic (winner of a 2023 sparqs Student Engagement Award) work embedded within it. With the rapid shift online, the Addressing the Digital Divide work highlighted the differing levels of accessibility of technology, or technological infrastructure, for specific communities and was informed by a scan of practice from 29 higher education institutions across the globe, including the USA, Canada, South Africa, the EU, China, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. Global conflicts brought into sharper focus the work needed on Supporting New Scots - supporting refugees and asylum seekers. Institutions have adopted different approaches, informed by their understandings of the needs of their learners, staff and the communities in which they are based.

Different approaches to equality, diversity and inclusion have been adopted by institutions informed by their understandings of the needs of their learners, staff and the communities in which they are based. The short to medium-term impacts of anti-racist project activity have raised awareness and understanding across the sector. Actions that will begin to change behaviours and practice are being implemented. The longer-term impact of ensuring an equitable learning experience is beginning to emerge and reported in some institutions.

- **Robert Gordon University** (RGU)'s 'Future of Teaching, Learning and Assessment' project was designed to support the University in defining a clear vision for the future of teaching, learning and assessment - providing an optimal and equitable learning experience for all. Focus groups and short-life working groups with representation from over 160 staff and students were involved in exploring the student experience and identifying the priority areas for enhancement, as well as developing the associated University's Standards. This approach was designed to ensure that the needs of a wide range of learners, disciplines and professional/regulatory/statutory bodies were represented. Creating an equitable and consistent RGU student experience, drawing on the best of existing practice from across each of its academic schools, setting Standards and providing guidance across all key aspects of the student experience has contributed to increased student satisfaction levels. Course feedback questionnaires for 2022-23 show 90.1% overall student satisfaction, representing the highest level of student satisfaction in the last five years and a 10% increase in overall student satisfaction since 2021-22. Streamlining staff and student assessment workload to enable students to balance study, work and personal commitments more effectively, with a direction towards one component of assessment per module, has been a significant catalyst for change. Student satisfaction with manageability of their course assessment workload reached 85.9% in session 2022-23.

- The **University of Stirling's** 'Inclusive Curriculum' project aimed at fostering and maintaining an inclusive community, including publication of an Inclusive Curriculum

Manifesto, developing a course on intercultural awareness, and staff decolonising reading lists. In the short term, the project has raised awareness and understanding of the importance of an inclusive curriculum and instilled a wide sense of ownership of work on an inclusive curriculum, providing a strong basis for the next strategy period.

- At the **University of Edinburgh**, surveys and interviews with students with disabilities have resulted in recommendations and actions which are being progressed by the School of Health in Social Science.

- A project at the **University of Aberdeen** has led to a much deeper understanding of the needs of care-experienced and estranged students regarding employability and skills development and highlighted closer consideration of their needs when planning mentoring and work experience initiatives.

- At **Edinburgh Napier University**, the International Summit aimed to bring together a diverse range of staff and students to explore and address the needs of international students. The Summit increased awareness and understanding of the unique challenges faced by international students among staff and students alike. Survey feedback post-Summit showed an improved recognition of these issues, leading to more targeted and effective support strategies. The Summit resulted in a list of co-created action points, formulated in collaboration with students. These actionable items, now being implemented, directly address the needs of the University's diverse learning communities, demonstrating a concrete response to the insights gathered during the Summit. The International Summit led to improved communication among university staff, departments and students, enhancing the University's responsiveness to student concerns. In response to issues highlighted during the Summit, such as visa challenges and induction struggles, support mechanisms are now being developed to better accommodate international students. The International Summit also surfaced the impact of the 'hidden curriculum', leading to the creation of guidance materials to help international students navigate UK academic and employment practice.

- The **Open University in Scotland's** 'Open to People: Forced Migration' project aimed to provide tools and learning for forced migrant communities to access education and employment. The University developed a programme in partnership with three organisations. Most learners reported in the learner survey that they gained study skills and digital skills, although some still did not feel confident using the laptops provided. The respondents reported gaining specific skills such as essay writing, using a learning journal and reflection, and they valued feedback from tutors that helped them develop these skills.

Subject-specific activity

Within institutions, small-scale, local level projects are diverse. The impact of this work includes increasing the reach of the Theme across institutions and providing opportunities for students to engage in subject-specific projects, sometimes leading bids for funding. While the collaborative clusters provide a mechanism for institutions to work in partnership on topics of mutual interest, the Enhancement Themes also encourage collaboration outside of this more formal route. An example of this at subject level is the partnership of four institutions progressing numeracy focused projects:

- **Abertay University's** 'Levelling the Playing Field: Supporting Student Success in Mathematics for Games' aimed to improve retention measures on specific modules and programmes.

- At the **University of Aberdeen**, a set of guidelines were developed as part of a project aimed at investigating ways of increasing accessibility of texts using mathematical symbols and language created using LaTex. These guidelines have been

disseminated widely through presentations across the Scottish higher education sector and further funding has been secured to support future phases of the project.

- At the **University of Glasgow**, the aim of a project to improve career-readiness through deployment of graduate numeracy resources has led to institution-wide staff recognition of, and engagement with, maths and stats provision for non-maths degree subject students. Awareness of maths skills gap(s) in particular subject areas/student cohorts as evidence, has provided a base for new initiatives to support students' learning in maths/stats.

- A project at the **University of Strathclyde** has eased the transition of students coming into the University without the necessary mathematics and statistics skills, as a result of changing curricula at school level. This has led to the creation and implementation of a short course designed to help address imbalances in skills identified during the project and a stronger collaborative partnership with the **University of Glasgow**.

Assessment and assessment feedback

The broad scope of the Theme encouraged some institutions to explore perennial challenges. Assessment, assessment feedback and student retention were priorities for some institutions, resulting in: resources for staff developed by students, with students; learning from university-wide events transferred to subject-specific events; a focus on achieving greater consistency in assessment feedback practices.

- The 'Storying **Edinburgh Napier University** research project' focused on institutional understanding of student perspectives of assessment and feedback. Anonymously gathered student stories of their experiences of assessment and feedback were fictionalised, reviewed by student interns, and developed into a resource for staff as part of staff academic development.

- At **Heriot-Watt University**, co-development of an institutional level set of Principles of Assessment for Learning is guiding strategic action.

- At the **University of the Highlands and Islands**, the Assessment and Feedback Symposium resulted in two discipline areas requesting follow-up bespoke events to consider how they might apply the techniques considered within their own context.

- A local-level project at the **University of Strathclyde**, reviewing student perspectives on aspects of inconsistency on assessment feedback (timeliness, scoring matrices, expectations), has resulted in staff collaborating to ensure greater consistency for students, with in-built evaluative measures to ensure long-term benefits. In addition, a student-led report - 'Looking at Retention' - aimed to identify areas for intervention and achieved this for the Health and Social Studies subject area. The report has influenced wider conversations across the institution and is feeding into key strategic committees and priorities.

Recognition of prior learning and micro-credentials

Significant employment sector changes during the pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis called for labour reskilling and upskilling as some sectors dwindled and others boomed. A timely update of Scotland's Framework for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and resources developed through the 'Understanding Micro-credentials and Small Qualifications' sector projects have been supporting fluid movement between employment, study and back to employment.

Work at two institutions is highlighted with one project focused on more effective support of students on entry, which has garnered international interest. In a second project, development

of a module for making RPL claims is anticipated to bring benefit in supporting flexible study pathways into and through higher education:

- **Abertay University** has been integrating work on micro-credentials and the [Personalised Approaches to Resilience and Community](#) collaborative cluster through formative diagnostic testing of students. The micro-credential approach at Abertay is attracting interest across the sector in Scotland and beyond. Two universities in Scotland are actively exploring and learning from Abertay. The University of the Highlands and Islands' involvement in piloting the diagnostic tool has given the University a framework to support the use of the tool, and to allow it to explore and evaluate in a wider sectoral context. International partners in Portugal, Greece and the USA are also in contact with Abertay for guidance.

- An objective of the **University of the West of Scotland's** Curriculum Framework: the Master's in Professional Development was successfully validated as a Master's in Professional Practice - an award supporting flexible routes into and through postgraduate study. The programme builds on and strengthens existing institutional approaches to Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and enables highly flexible pathways of study drawing on modules from across the University's postgraduate portfolio. Strong stakeholder engagement has meant that, in addition to the planned open title for this programme, specific 'sector focused' pathways have been designed and validated in collaboration with each of the University's four academic Schools. There has been positive feedback through the development and approval process including employers and industry. Building on Enhancement Theme sector activities, a colleague involved in the QAA-managed project on 'Valuing and Recognising Prior Learning and Experience', was directly involved in the University team developing a new postgraduate module for RPL claims. Positive feedback was received on the new RPL-focused module throughout the development and approval process, including from employers and industry and from the external panel member, recognising the benefit in supporting flexible study pathways into and through higher education.

Sharing practice

Sharing practice is a key aspect of the Enhancement Themes which is achieved through a range of approaches. Sharing practice internally has increased the reach of the Theme in institutions, encouraging new participants and promoting new thinking. Institutions operating award schemes report the positive impact that award nomination/winning can have on staff and student personal satisfaction and professional recognition. Through external events, new collaborations have been formed. Highlights of institutions' achievements and successes are:

- **Abertay University** hosting the European First Year Experience conference in June 2023, which showcased the University's, and some of the Scottish sector's, Theme work to an international audience. There were 333 attendees from 24 countries.

- The **University of Aberdeen** showcased some of its Enhancement Theme activity through its hosting of the Higher Education Teaching and Learning Conference in June 2023.

- **Glasgow School of Art** developed a suite of case studies to share practice and identify approaches to supporting resilient learning communities through student-led and partnership projects. Nine projects were supported producing various outputs with cataloguing and showcasing work to follow.

- Targeted at arts educators and helping them to both develop their practice and see alternative ways to resolve challenges, the **Royal Conservatoire of Scotland's** Arts Educator Podcasts aimed to show the various ways in which arts educators support learners. The podcasts provide current MEd Learning and Teaching students with a rich resource to reference and reflect on, but, on a more subtle level, it also provides an insight into how non-directive coaching-based questions can elicit deep and thought-provoking responses.

- The **University of St Andrews'** Open Forums and Showcase internal dissemination events successfully increased the presence of the Enhancement Theme work in the institution (for example, in addition to returning participants, there were many new people joining at each event). The Open Forums resulted in the development of new student and staff collaborative projects and applications for project funding were received as a direct result of attendance at the Open Forums. Findings of these funded projects were presented and celebrated at the end of Theme Showcase Event.

- The **University of Strathclyde's** Best Practice Award aimed to support staff in feeling valued and encourage them to continue development of their practice through scholarship by collecting and celebrating stories of innovative and effective practice that took place during the pandemic. An unexpected outcome was feeding into the University's Infrastructure Project, which facilitated and enhanced the engagement with the Enhancement Themes. Informal feedback revealed that the best practice shared via the SharePoint repository inspired colleagues to develop and submit their own projects. There was a noticeable increase in the diversity of project applications received in subsequent years of the Theme.

- **Robert Gordon University's** Enhancement Awards aimed to encourage staff and students across the University to become more familiar and engaged with QAA Enhancement Themes. Two award schemes were launched during the Resilient Learning Communities Theme where staff could apply for funding and support to undertake relevant short-term projects: 'Emerging Stronger' awards and 'Enhancing for Impact' awards. Six of the projects have presented their findings at a number of external conferences over the last two years and have been invited to work with others in the sector to develop further outputs leading to professional satisfaction and recognition. There has been increased awareness of Enhancement Themes and

quality assurance by dissemination at the University's internal teaching and learning conference. Presentation of award winners' work in the Student Experience Sub-Committee, university publications and specific workshops have inspired others to get involved. Award recipients have developed skills in project management, enhancement and evaluation for future enhancement work.

Staff development

The impact of activity and projects typically impacts staff behaviour as a short to medium-term outcome. Supporting and developing staff, in turn, is anticipated to impact on the student experience. For example, better signposting of students to key support services has shown an increase in staff confidence and greater service demand. Motivating staff through bespoke training and supportive networks has led to staff seeking further qualification/accreditation.

- At **Queen Margaret University** (QMU), the Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) Project aimed to enhance and formalise training for Personal Academic Tutors to promote signposting to key support services. The project approach was catalysed by attendance at a QAA Scotland 'Focus on Professional Services' event by a QMU cross-institutional team of five (staff and students). The impact so far has been: training and induction events delivered for new and existing PATs; establishment of a PAT working group; design and delivery of a PAT survey; piloting an electronic system to log PAT meetings; other recommendations for further enhancement of the PAT system.

- **Robert Gordon University** (RGU)'s 'Supporting RGU's Course Leader Community' involved collaboration between a range of professional services departments to develop and deliver workshops for RGU Course Leaders to support significantly higher student demand for pastoral care in increasingly complex student situations. Course leaders report adopting the recommended strategies and measures and fed back an increased confidence to refer students to the appropriate central support department. Support departments have provided anecdotal data regarding increased student

demand, which has informed the recruitment of additional counselling staff (enabled by additional external funding from Scottish Government).

- The **Royal Conservatoire of Scotland's** Transitions coaching aimed to design staff development activities to support staff coaching for those involved in Transitions coaching, providing learners from SIMD 20 areas and/or with care experience to access free pre-HE learning in all areas of the performing and production arts, with the view that this will increase their chances of going on to study at degree level with the Conservatoire or another institution. The new provision in session 2022-23 increased Transitions coaches' awareness and understanding about the practice at a deeper level and change in behaviour was noted through the actual coaching sessions and from the content of the development sessions. The Coaching Training sessions for Transitions coaches were highly productive and positively received. Although only five of the 10 coaches took up Coaching for the Coaches session, one coach has gone on to further study, gaining an accredited qualification in coaching. Only two Action Learning Set sessions took place. Despite a high level of engagement from the coaches in attendance, there was not sufficient buy-in for further sessions. 30 students engaged in coaching across Transitions and UG, and, on average, each student undertook 3.6 sessions, with a total of 98 coaching sessions over the year. There was a notable drop off for those opting for monthly coaching sessions rather than fortnightly sessions. Nonetheless, reflections from coaches and students suggest that the levels of engagement in the coaching itself were significantly higher and the sessions were more productive now that these were no longer mandatory for all Transitions students.

- The **University of the West of Scotland** piloted a professional learning community supporting learning and teaching leadership. With an externally-led workshop and coaching support, the pilot aimed to support leadership of learning and teaching, both existing, and aspiring leaders, and establish an institutional Principal Fellowship peer network. The community intended to provide the space, and both expert-led and peer support for reflection on professional practice and learning and teaching leadership. In the short term, in addition to positive feedback from participants, there has also been development of applications for Principal Fellowship of Advance HE.

- **Scotland's Rural College** (SRUC)'s three-part Supporting Year Tutors project started with a student-led research project undertaking a review of non-SRUC approaches and of the literature, and working with Year Tutors to explore how to better support them and develop a community of practice, so as to better support students. Impact in the third and final phase highlighted the key difference being a core framework in place for staff to find the basic information required, without needing to refer to multiple policies and processes. Organised according to the academic year, ensuring staff are able to access the information at the right time, means staff time is more effective.

Attributes and skills

Following on from the previous section, other examples of initiatives aimed at behaviour change and skills development, for both staff and students, are shown in the following institutional examples:

- At **Abertay University**, a project using micro-credits to develop successful student attributes and skills has yielded 97% pass rates over the two years of operation. The overall impact on retention behaviours is being analysed and the University hopes that the confidence building activities of these modules will lead to improved retention rates across all programmes. The micro-credential approach at Abertay continues to attract interest across the sector in Scotland and beyond. Two universities in Scotland are actively exploring and learning from Abertay. International partners in Portugal, Greece and the USA are also in contact with Abertay for guidance.

- At the **University of St Andrews**, a student project embedding conflict resolution training into an existing first-year module, before group work begins, has been created and will be evaluated.

- At **Glasgow Caledonian University**, a project aimed at enhancing staff awareness and implementation of changes to better support changes in the student population (perfectionism and student agency) has explored changing student skills, attitudes and expectations, and is providing key data to consider reform to timetabling and curriculum delivery.

- At the **University of Dundee**, a specific focus on student and staff wellbeing, building upon equality, diversity and inclusive principles has led to comic-based material that is accessible to students, staff and patients alongside training in non-violent communication to challenge unacceptable behaviour and attitudes.

Student support

The Theme inspired a number of institutional projects focused on supporting students including peer-to-peer initiatives. Some institutions introduced online peer mentoring systems to support students in the transition to digital provision and this created opportunities for connection among student communities. Impact reported by institutions was increasing sense of community and student confidence. Examples of student support activities included:

- **Abertay University's** Student Success Officers project aimed to involve Student Success Officers harnessing existing data analytics processes to implement targeted interventions and provide a personalised approach to student support and development. Qualitative data is very supportive of the role with student stories recognising the individual and personalised approach. In the longer term, evidence around outcomes in the Schools in terms of improving retention rates is being developed.

- The **University of the West of Scotland's** 'Model of Supporting Student Success' was introduced to streamline and better support student journeys based on understanding the individual needs of students, early intervention and proactive support. The tripartite model of supporting student success was premised on Professional Service Support (through the Student Success Hub), Academic Support (through ASPIRE modules and review of personal tutoring), and Peer Support. The model provides a fundamental shift from directing resources to a deficit model of targeting failing students, to proactively creating an environment in which all students can succeed. It is based on bringing together varied stakeholders and groups of expertise to provide coherent and proactive support for student journeys. The successful launch and embedding of the Student Success Team, and the formation of School-aligned Retention Task Forces are evidence of the coherence and integrated combination of expertise. The Task Forces are utilising evidence-informed strategies to provide early intervention and proactive support. The learning from this initiative was shared at the QAA Enhancement Themes Conference and European First Year Experience Conference 2023.

- At the **University of Glasgow**, a project was developed aiming to increase, standardise and improve opportunity for students at all levels to engage in a variety of peer-enabled activity to increase student confidence, capacity and sense of community. A new, centralised team of staff with responsibility for developing/enhancing peer-enabled activity across the institution was created. This team provides a focus for the institution in engaging with current/future students, and how they want to learn, by gathering detailed evaluation of, and feedback on, the initiatives to provide information on how to best embed peer-enabled activity.

- A three-part project by **Scotland's Rural College** was focused on developing peer support communities. The initiative built a partnership between students, subject staff and Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching staff, and had engagement from staff and students. The initiative received positive feedback from students and staff, feedback from volunteers and students who had access to peer support. One of the projects - Mucker's Nation (Equine) - won a [2021 sparqs' Student Engagement Award](#) for a student-led initiative in a college. The project has been presented at the external Scottish Peer Support Network. Volunteers reported that they developed skills and confidence over year 1, particularly in online delivery (this was a year impacted by the pandemic), working with others, study skills and communication. Student attendees also reported increased confidence. Staff reported better understanding of peer support and their role within it. The College was asked to set up a project for Vet Nursing due to the success of the Equine group. Through phase 2 (expanding) and phase 3 (embedding), a range of positive impact has been reported by the College.

Student voice

Listening to students and communicating effectively was critical during the pandemic and institutions reported on ways this had been achieved. In some institutions, the use of short, targeted pulse surveys to gather student feedback on their experience of digital provision, enabled institutions to respond quickly and proactively to issues raised by students. The impact of using digital meetings rather than face-to-face meetings, was a boost to student confidence, leading to increased levels of student engagement in quality processes. Innovative approaches to communicating complex information to students, through the use of explainer videos, infographics and direct-to-camera videos were particularly useful in communicating information about institutional 'no detriment' policies or approaches, and degree algorithms. Some institutions linked a focus on student voice to improved student satisfaction.

- At the **University of Stirling**, the Student Voice project aimed to increase the direct contribution of students to the University's enhancement initiatives over the three-year period of the Theme. This provided invaluable evidence and insight to inform developments. Students supported the rapid development of online provision including a more systematic approach to modular and programmatic curriculum design and in developing the approach to personal tutoring. As a result, the University's move to online provision during the pandemic was commended in its ELIR Outcome Report in April 2021. The University improved its position in the overall NSS rankings, moving up two positions in the institutional table to 26th in 2021, a position sustained in 2022. The findings and recommendations of the Students' Union report on personal tutoring helped to shape planning in this area, including the University's new Learning and Teaching Strategy.

- At the **University of Edinburgh**, enhancing the University's student guides to giving feedback, aimed to improve sense of belonging and community building among students. The project achieved an awareness of the challenge of communicating the guides effectively to students and the University is exploring options to improve further on this.

- At the **University of the West of Scotland**, there was a review and enhancement of student representation and strengthening partnership working through the

development of the Student Partnership Agreement (SPA) and the Student Partnership Forum (SPF). Early successes were an increased level of engagement of student-elected representatives and positive staff and student and student representative feedback following initial enhancement to activities. There has been continued progress in embedding the Student Partnership Agreement and the Student Partnership Forum (SPF) and the SPF won a 2023 sparqs' Student Engagement Award.

Student transitions

Although the Student Transitions Theme ended in 2017, the focus on transition continues and a number of Resilient Learning Communities projects had that emphasis, particularly on widening participation. While the longer-term impact on student outcomes has not been fully realised, impact reported by some institutions shows a change in student mindset. For students involved in developing transition-focused initiatives, the benefits reported by institutions are skills development.

- At **Abertay University**, new approaches to orientation and the 'relentless welcome' project have started, and staff and student feedback will be collated and analysed to determine future improvements.

- **Glasgow School of Art's** 'Preparing for Studio Learning' aimed to co-create a transitions resource which supports students new to studio practice and studio learning in order to enhance and smooth the transition. Students build confidence through considering the behaviours, skills and practices they need to engage successfully in studio. In the short term, a Transitions resource has been created successfully and will be launched and evaluated in session 2023-24.

- At the **University of St Andrews**, a student-led project developed resources, including posters and social media communications for students, and guidelines for staff, aimed to help students return to in-person teaching and learning. The student team was awarded a prize by the University for their contribution to the project, which recognised

the value of the resources to help support the resilience of the University's students when returning to in-person teaching.

- **Queen Margaret University** (QMU)'s Student Champions: Learner Journey Maps Project aimed to embed student voice and co-created approaches to understanding and supporting learner journeys for different cohorts of the University's students. 12 Student Champions were recruited, representing a range of lived experiences across different learner journeys. They developed Learner Journey maps for QMU students and then designed and delivered a range of activities to refine and develop these further for different entry routes to QMU. Student Champions were trained in focus group design and delivery, which has developed valuable research skills among the Student Champions cohort, thus building a sustainable model for future delivery. This initiative has also led to empowerment of the Student Champions. For example, they wrote and submitted their own abstract for the European First Year Experience international conference and gave an excellent oral presentation at the Enhancement Themes conference in June 2023. Thus, the students acted as ambassadors for both QMU and students as partners approaches, while also developing their own experience and employability prospects. They have also presented their work to Scottish HE Developers (SHED) network sector meeting, plus various internal QMU committees and groups, and submitted an application to the 2023 sparqs Student Engagement Awards. The Maps have also already informed the work of a number of QMU groups and committees, including the Transition and Induction Working Group, Student Experience Committee, and Programme Leaders network. Final versions of the Learner Journey maps will be refined over the summer to also signpost available support services, and they will then be distributed to new QMU students as well as staff, including Personal Academic Tutors.

- At the **University of Aberdeen**, a staff and student workshop series to develop and discuss intervention/support approaches for widening access medical students had significant engagement of staff and students, and led to the creation of an evidence-based and theory-informed intervention strategy to support widening access students in MBChB.

- At the **Open University in Scotland**, the 'Supporting Students from Deprived Backgrounds' project aimed to improve skills and knowledge as well as increase confidence and motivation to engage with learning, leading to increased positive education with higher education in the community and a positive change in community outcomes. Qualitative feedback from a small number of attendees at phase 2 events has been encouraging, showing positive reflections on the content and level of engagement. Phase 3 of the SIMD20 Project aimed to reduce the awarding gap between students from SIMD20 areas and the wider student body. In other similar work, the 'Students in Secure Environments - Open Learn Materials' aimed to change the mindset that, 'education is not for me'. Feedback obtained from learners showed the positive impact of completing the Open Learn courses.

- At the **University of Strathclyde**, the 'Widening Access Student Transitions: UG to PGT' project aimed to remove barriers and provide support to students form a non-traditional background move from undergraduate into postgraduate study through a series of online resources. While the resources have value, further work is required to identify the longer-term impact on widening access student numbers and attainment.

The Theme legacy

The Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme leaves a legacy of resources that are anticipated to actively support colleagues in Scotland and beyond. Further information on key resources across all the Theme activities is at [Resilient Learning Communities](#).