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"The World Is Watching This Work"

Introduction

Tom Haffie, (University of Western Ontario) gave an inspirational kick-start to the Enhancement Themes (ET) 08 conference, telling the Scottish HE Community that "the world is watching this work". He was referring to the unique enhancement-led approach that has characterised our quality assurance systems for the last 5 years. The Enhancement Themes are one of five aspects of the Quality Enhancement Framework, which aims to

- "address the problems and challenges inherent in twenty-first century mass and global higher education
- find high quality and effective solutions to improve the student experience
- be more efficient and effective in delivering transformational change." (Quality Enhancement Framework, 2006)

The uniqueness of Scotland's Enhancement Theme culture is probably only clear to those, like Tom, who inhabit other quality cultures, or who have long enough memories to remember what preceded it. For instance, the Themes, although organised by QAA Scotland, are characterised by sector-wide involvement which puts much of the decision-making about the Themes in the hands of five partner bodies:

- the Scottish Funding Council
- Universities Scotland
- QAA Scotland.
- Higher Education Academy.
- NUS Scotland.

What seems, perhaps, like a (potentially) politically explosive mix of bodies appears to have found a modus vivendi in the ET set-up – perhaps in the common realisation that working towards quality enhancement together is better than battling over quality *assurance*. All of the groups are represented on SHEEC, the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee, which manages and plans the ET approach. The process is also made easier by the small number of HEIs in Scotland (20). Previous Themes were Integrative Assessment, Flexible Delivery, Employability, Responding to Student Needs and Assessment. Current Themes are The First Year (just finishing) and Research-Teaching Linkages (which will finish in autumn 2008). The new Theme which is about to start is called Quality Cultures and Systems & Structures for Enhancement. Details of all of these Themes, and reports / publications / resources from each of them, can be found on the Enhancement Themes website.

The highlight of the ET year is the annual ET Conference, when those involved in the current themes come together to disseminate their findings and discuss ideas with colleagues across the sector. This brief article will cover some of the highlights of the two days of the March 2008 annual conference, covering the Themes of The First Year and Research-Teaching Linkages.

Day 1 - The First Year

Tom Haffie's presentation which I referred to above was, on the surface, about how to use Personal Response Systems ('clickers') to engage students in lectures. He very ably demonstrated some of the techniques he uses with his (well attended!) 800 student classes, and had the participants intrigued by test questions related to hypothetical male-female proportions in the population. Conference delegates voted to agree or disagree with the

assertion that if families had to stop having children as soon as they had a female child, then current male-female population proportions would continue. We all left the session arguing about the topic, demonstrating Tom's key point: that technology can contribute to lectures being lively, discursive occasions, rather than delivery events, even when large numbers of participants are involved. Tom also emphasised the importance of lecturers themselves having satisfying teaching experiences, citing a number of writers, including Palmer's (1998) concepts of 'generativity' (creativity by elders, in the service of the young) and 'the courage to teach'. Tom's presentation, and those of the other speakers, can be found on the Conference website.

The first day of the conference also showcased a number of projects sponsored by the First Year Theme, which ran from late 2005, with final reports available in 2008. The Theme, and the keynote speech on the topic by the Theme Leader, Professor Terry Mayes, focussed on how to enable first year students to achieve their maximum potential, rather than just 'get through' – what Mayes called an emphasis on success, rather than on avoidance of failure.

Workshops, Day 1 – The First Year

The First Year Theme projects presented are now fairly mature in their stage of development, since the project leaders had been working on their topics for almost two years by that point. For example, Fran Alston and Karen Thomson (Napier University) had looked at how to embed scholarship skills institutionally. Their University was building scholarship development into curriculum review, linking scholarship skills to employability and generic skills: in fact, in both the First Year workshops and Research-Teaching Linkages (RTL) workshops on Day 2, it was clear that all the strands under consideration were linked, and part of a spectrum. The spectrum starts with transition into HE and the development of scholarship in the First Year, through to the graduate attributes which are the focus of the RTL theme, and on to the employability of our graduates post-university (Employability was a theme in 2004-05). One of the challenges for all of us is how to focus our efforts to coordinate the whole spectrum of needs. For Alston and Thomson, the key was academic writing, which they saw as the point at which students could demonstrate that they had achieved the intended learning outcomes. They highlighted the importance of building academic communities and academic literacies, and of using an embedded approach where possible – although they were realistic about the significant barriers which hinder the adoption of such an optimistic, holistic approach. Conference attendees had many opportunities to offer their ideas and solutions; for example, I heard a lecturer from RSAMD advocate the development of writing from the first term of the first year, not in the third year. A recent innovation for her students was the introduction of summaries of reflective journals from the very start of their course. Workshop attendees agreed that students needed to learn the academic 'grammar' (paraphrasing Farrell, 2000) of their discipline early on – even if academics themselves speak different dialects of that language. Dialect differences include citation and referencing conventions – even within subject disciplines – and expectations of what students could and should write. It was suggested that, while students need to learn to manage ambiguity and appreciate the complexities of academic work, a basic set of parameters could be agreed, for example within a faculty. These parameters would reduce linguistic 'noise', ie distractions or misconceptions which detract from good communication, and help students and staff to achieve shared meanings and approaches to skills like writing.

Posters, Day 1 - The First Year

As well as workshops on a range of projects, almost 40 posters were presented, making it difficult to know whether to talk to colleagues or look at some of the really interesting posters during breaks. The posters were both generic eg 'Supporting the First Year Experience' (Aberdeen University); 'The First Year Experience for Distance Students' (Open University); 'Coaching to Enhance Student Learning' (RGU), 'Variations in Grading' (Glasgow University)) and subject-specific. Examples of the latter were 'Wiki Use in Veterinary Pathology' (University of Edinburgh); 'Pre-entry contact with First Year Engineering Students' (University of Glasgow); 'Wiki use in 'Combined Physics Labs / Tutorials for First Year' (Glasgow). For me, if there had

been a prize for best poster title, it would have gone to "Mammoths and Tigers and Quests, oh my!... and a little dog too: research-enhanced teaching of introductory programming" by Coull et al (University of Abertay). However, it would have been extremely difficult to give prizes for poster quality and interest, since most of the 40 posters would have been in contention – an unusual phenomenon, in my experience. The success of the posters will no doubt lead the conference organizers (QAA Scotland) to include a little more viewing time next year.

Like the project workshops, the posters encapsulated key issues and how specific institutions or departments were dealing with them. For example, Chirnside et al's poster entitled 'Signposts to Success: Helping Students Get Prepared' offered a useful diagrammatic summary of what they felt their first year students needed (and I hope they will forgive my rather more amateur depiction – see
http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/documents/AETC2008/poster%20abstracts.pdf for the original version):
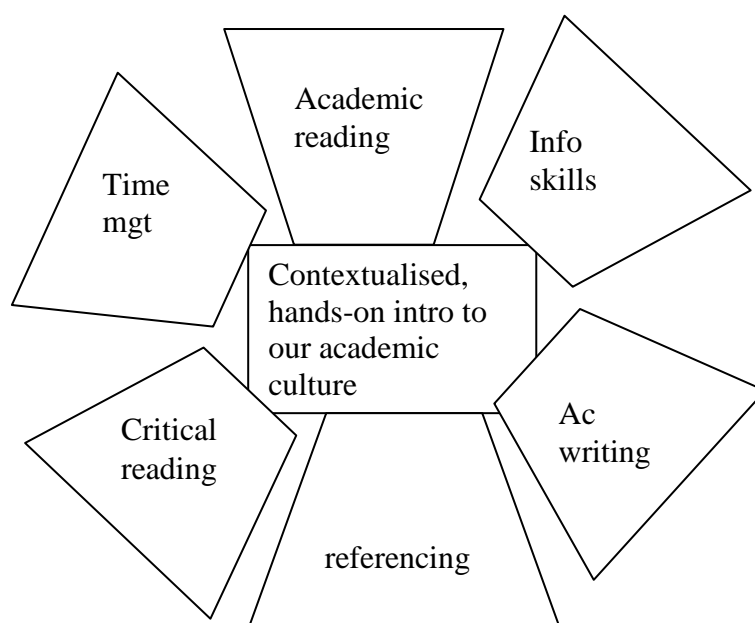
Final Plenary, Day 1 - The First Year

An upbeat note was struck at the end of the First Year day by Randy Swing (Executive Director, Association for Institutional Research, Florida). Randy informed attendees that the US has been static on the First Year for 10 years, while the papers for this Theme show that Scotland has made significant steps forward. He felt that some of the things we had got 'right' were:

-        the power of peer working
-        a coordinated approach
-        tackling issues both in and outside the classroom
-        multiple L&T methods
-        that the focus has been on *all* students, not just those at risk
.
Randy offered the metaphor of Momentum Theory, based on work by Collins (2001). The key element in Momentum Theory is the fly wheel (a heavy weight which stores energy, and is difficult to get moving, but hard to stop once moving). Students who struggle and don't achieve enough credits in the First year suffer from not getting the momentum to get their 'fly wheel' moving. Equally, students with a low grade point average (including those who proclaim "I only

need to get 40%") have less chance of finishing up with a degree. Randy's ideas on how students can be helped gain momentum included creating a sense of social belonging (eg, in the US, by being part of a sorority / paternity), or offering students summer modules so they can study at a pace which suits them. He asked what the accelerators and brakes were for students in Scotland - what helps the fly wheel get going? He suggested that two key issues (which have been partly addressed in the Theme) relate to transition to university – we haven't yet linked up the stages – and social norming. This is about helping students realize what is 'normal', and about correcting misconceptions. Students may behave according to a perceived norm (eg "everyone drinks too much at university"; "nobody does much work for their assignments"), which can jeopardize their chances of success. He offered ideas for confronting such misconceptions from Ball State University, Indiana, which runs the MAP-Works programme, and where students undertake self and peer assessment of the type:

1   What grades do you think you'll earn this semester? [mostly As: students tend to over-predict on the basis of what they got in high school]
2   What do you think most other students will get?
3   Now here's the profile of last year's students, and here's how you fit in.

The First Year - Other Activities

An innovative aspect of the First Year Theme which was not presented directly at the Conference, but which came out in workshop discussions, was the provision of small grants to each institution, to allow them to develop the First Year agenda in their own context. For example, at Heriot-Watt University bids were invited for the small project fund, and the grant was given to the Students Association. They surveyed first years across the University, and the report is being used to inform strategy on supporting first years. So, although the First Year Theme has formally come to an end, institutional projects are still running and some continuation funding has been provided to allow this to happen.

Day 2 - Research-Teaching Linkages

This Enhancement Theme took an interesting turn from its early stages which, as a member of the national Steering Group, I was privileged to be part of. The first interesting aspect of the Theme was the interpretation of RTL as a means to develop research-type graduate attributes. These generic attributes go beyond what are commonly expressed as transferable / core / employability skills, focusing more on the following research-type metacognitive skills:

At undergraduate level

- Critical understanding
- Informed by current developments in the subject
- An awareness of the provisional nature of knowledge, how knowledge is created, advanced and renewed, and the excitement of changing knowledge
- The ability to identify and analyse problems and issues and to formulate, evaluate and apply evidence-based solutions and arguments
- An ability to apply a systematic and critical assessment of complex problems and issues
- An ability to deploy techniques of analysis and enquiry
- Familiarity with advanced techniques and skills
- Originality and creativity in formulating, evaluating and applying evidence-based solutions and arguments
- An understanding of the need for a high level of ethical, social, cultural, environmental and wider professional conduct.

And at Master's level

- Conceptual understanding that enables critical evaluation of current research and advanced scholarship
- Originality in the application of knowledge
- The ability to deal with complex issues and make sound judgments in the absence of complete data (from Enhancement Theme RTL website).

Day 2, Research-Teaching Linkages - The Projects

The second innovation was to focus not only on the generic Theme, but also on subject discipline projects to report on RTLs across Scotland. The discipline groupings were not easy to categorize, but constraints meant that it was not possible to have the same number of groupings as, for example, the HEA Subject Centres. The discipline projects, each led by a Project Leader from a different institution, were:

Arts and Social Sciences
Business and Management
Creative and Cultural Practice
Engineering and the Built Environment
Health and Social Care
Information and Mathematical Sciences
Life Sciences
Medicine, Dentistry and Vet
Physical Sciences

Each of these groups reported on its findings at the Conference, giving examples of good practice and patterns they had found. This is not to say the Project Directors had an easy job; there is probably a level of apathy in the sector, after 5 years of the Themes, to yet another call for case studies or "good practice". An interesting focus for the Project Directors, however, was to identify the graduate attributes in their subject(s), and suggest how these attributes could be developed in their courses. Not surprisingly, the picture from, for example, Physical Sciences was different from the picture from Arts and Social Sciences since each reflected the philosophical and epistemological characteristics of their fields.

As with the other ETs, the challenge for RTLs was not just to uncover interesting ideas or case examples, but to work out how to engage staff across the sector with the Theme. The subject discipline approach was one strategy, and these discipline projects will be disseminated among their disciplinary communities. In several cases, the HEA Subject Centres were involved, and this will surely facilitate dissemination. The Conference gave project directors and other academics the chance to discuss their project findings as they were approaching the end of their project activity. Project reports will be published in autumn 2008.

A further project, an overarching sector-wide study, was conducted by Professors Ray Land and George Gordon of Strathclyde University. Ray and George provided an overview of RTLs conceptually and empirically, both in the UK and internationally, and this fed into the work of the discipline projects. This relieved the discipline project directors from doing basic research into non-discipline-specific aspects of the Theme. Professor Alan Jenkins acted as Consultant / Advisor to both the Discipline Projects and the Institutional Contacts who coordinated their institution's contact with the Theme.

Day 2, Research-Teaching Linkages – Final Plenary

The final session of the RTL day included a presentation by Calvin Smith (Griffith University, Australia) with his insights into the challenge of embedding graduate attributes into the curriculum, and the necessary alignment of "purpose, policy, conception, curriculum strategy, QA and QE" to ensure a successful outcome. Calvin argued that to achieve this alignment, an

"organisational development perspective" was required, with accompanying professional development for staff. This professional development should focus on knowledge about curriculum and course design, independent and collaborative approaches to curriculum design and on collective approaches to the integration of courses into programmes. An agreed understanding of what these "Graduate Attributes" are is also required and a variety of attributes was discussed. The use of mapping across the programme was proposed as a means to ensure that all elements of the course contained these GAs, and the development of a "learning community ethos" to support the development of students within an RTL-based curriculum was encouraged.

The Student Voice

Since 'the student voice' is an integral component of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework, student leaders attended the conference, in representation of the student body, and contributed a great deal. In fact, one of the keynote speakers on the second day of the conference (Liam Burns, President of the Students Association at Heriot-Watt University) laid out a number of challenges for the institutions present in his presentation on 'Empowering, Engaging and Developing Students'. Liam gave his version of the Jenkins et al (2007) research-teaching links matrix and threw down the gauntlet to those attending to think not in terms of rhetoric and self-evidently good ideas, but to tackle the real practical issue of making the Themes real for the students who experience Scottish higher education.

All done bar the shouting?

By the end of this year's ET Conference, it was clear that, while lots of hard thinking and talking had been done, no-one was complacent about having all the right answers. The plenary discussion sessions raised a number of issues which conference attendees were still grappling with. Examples were:

-        do we set high enough expectations for our students, and is the first year challenging enough? To what extent is there a mismatch between what students bring with them from school, and what we then offer in universities?

-        the First year and RTL Themes have taught us a great deal about the literature on these topics, about approaches in other countries, and about practice in Scotland. So how do we overcome the difficulties of translating this knowledge – which is still in the possession of the subset of staff who have *chosen* to access it via the themes – into real improvements in what our students experience? Embedding and extending engagement with the Themes is a real challenge, as recognised by the SFC Review of the QEF (2007) which talked of "the uncertain relationship between the enhancement themes and daily practices". Part of this challenge lies in how to make our learning from the Themes systemic: if it is optional information, then it will probably be used by those who are already L&T champions.

-        An implicit theory of change behind the Themes is that of *transfer*. The implication is that we can learn from what has been done elsewhere, and transfer it to our own contexts. But, of course, much is 'lost in translation', and so more hard thinking is required as to how to help L&T professionals develop their own take on the Themes, and decide how they can apply the thinking to their own specific teaching.

The Future

The Quality Enhancement Framework has been reviewed by the Scottish Funding Council (see http://www.sfc.ac.uk/information/info_circulars/sfc/2007/sfc1107/sfc1107.html). The review felt a strength of the whole Quality Enhancement Framework was

> a theory of educational change that placed far more weight on consensual approaches than on the more coercive stances embedded in some quality assurance regimes (Scottish Funding Council, 2007)

and there is a commitment to "the long run" (SFC, 2007). There has been substantial consultation about how the sector would like to see the Enhancement Theme initiative taken forward, with a general feeling that the sector would like more time to work on each of the Themes. So the rapid turnover of Themes in the last five years is set for a more realistic pace, and we can assume that the Enhancement Theme Conference will be one opportunity to discuss not only the Theme of the moment, but also the way these Themes can best be used.

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