enhancement
themes

Enhancing practice

Quality Enhancement Themes: The First Year Experience

The nature and purposes of the first year: sharing and reflecting on international experiences and initiatives

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Professor George Gordon

Preface

The approach to quality and standards in higher education (HE) in Scotland is enhancement led and learner centred. It was developed through a partnership of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Universities Scotland, the National Union of Students in Scotland (NUS Scotland) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Scotland. The Higher Education Academy has also joined that partnership. The Enhancement Themes are a key element of a five-part framework, which has been designed to provide an integrated approach to quality assurance and enhancement. The Enhancement Themes support learners and staff at all levels in further improving higher education in Scotland; they draw on developing innovative practice within the UK and internationally. The five elements of the framework are:

- a comprehensive programme of subject-level reviews undertaken by higher education institutions (HEIs) themselves; guidance is published by the SFC (www.sfc.ac.uk)

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

- improved forms of public information about quality; guidance is provided by the SFC (www.sfc.ac.uk)

- a greater voice for students in institutional quality systems, supported by a national development service - student participation in quality scotland (sparqs) (www.sparqs.org.uk)

- a national programme of Enhancement Themes aimed at developing and sharing good practice to enhance the student learning experience, facilitated by QAA Scotland (www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk).

The topics for the Enhancement Themes are identified through consultation with the sector and implemented by steering committees whose members are drawn from the sector and the student body. The steering committees have the task of establishing a programme of development activities, which draw on national and international good practice. Publications emerging from each Theme are intended to provide important reference points for HEIs in the ongoing strategic enhancement of their teaching and learning provision. Full details of each Theme, its steering committee, the range of research and development activities as well as the outcomes are published on the Enhancement Themes website (www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk).

To further support the implementation and embedding of a quality enhancement culture within the sector - including taking forward the outcomes of the Enhancement Themes - an overarching committee, the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC), chaired by Professor Kenneth Miller, Vice-Principal, University of Strathclyde, has the important dual role of supporting the overall approach of the Enhancement Themes, including the five-year rolling plan, as well as institutional enhancement strategies and management of quality. SHEEC, working with the individual topic-based Enhancement Themes' steering committees, will continue to provide a powerful vehicle for progressing the enhancement-led approach to quality and standards in Scottish higher education.

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Contents

1   Introduction

This booklet is part of a series of publications based on the Quality Enhancement Theme: the First-Year Experience. Readers are reminded that the Enhancement Theme involved nine projects, each of which has a report published by QAA (see Appendix). Additionally, an overview will bring together key features and findings of the Enhancement Theme.

The Enhancement Theme concentrated on two dimensions: student engagement and student empowerment, and the research literature provides ample evidence to suggest that both can play a significant role in enabling successful study in higher education (HE).

Engagement also has several facets here: with the institution, with the profile of subjects studied, with staff and with peers. Affiliation and the development of a sense of belonging are central features here and strategies include:

- using learning communities

- fostering peer networks

- adopting tailored ways of engaging new students by personalising contacts

- ensuring early assessment and feedback

- seeking opportunities to overcome the potential loneliness and isolation that can occur in large classes and in a multi-class first-year curriculum; the absence of friends and established social relations and mentors; and the sheer scale of many institutions in an era of mass HE.

Engagement also captures the crucial dimension of student motivation and ways of encouraging and motivating commitment and capturing interest.

Empowerment has primarily been interpreted as helping students to sharpen and extend their learning competences, and it can lead to remedial strategies such as support for mathematical, language or information literacy skills. However, it can be interpreted more positively as creating the condition where students reflect - possibly through personal development planning (PDP) - on their aspirations, goals, strengths and weaknesses and how these relate to the learning outcomes of their chosen studies and the competences, aptitudes and knowledge needed to achieve their personal academic potential. Additionally, empowerment extends into the arena of capturing the student voice and how this can be facilitated in the first year of study.

The specific purpose of this booklet is to focus on a small selection of findings that institutions, practitioners, policy-makers and students could use reflectively. The material presented is not intended to be comprehensive, but it is hoped that it will be of broad interest to a range of stakeholders.

The work and discussions in support of the Enhancement Theme illustrated included:

- considerable interest and activity in Scottish higher education institutions (HEIs) on various dimensions of the first-year experience
- a recurrent desire to reflect on practice, review lacunae and learn from the experience of others.

Many examples of actions and initiatives in Scottish HEIs are contained within the nine project reports. They provide rich opportunities for reflection on practices, approaches, purposes and issues. More distinctively, the entire work of the Enhancement Theme has provided illustrations of how sector-wide and institutionally-based reflection and dialogues can be fostered and productively supported. That detailed information is not repeated here and readers are encouraged to refer to the project reports.

The remainder of this booklet focuses primarily on experiences and initiatives from other HE sectors and institutions beyond Scotland.

2   Overview

Judging by the rapidly growing literature and increasing number of dedicated national and international conferences (for example, European, American, South African, Australasian/Pacific Rim, Japanese), there is widespread interest in a range of aspects of the nature, purposes, character and enhancement of the first-year undergraduate experience in HE. Given the massive growth in taught master's degree programmes, it is not surprising that the first year of that component is also attracting attention and investigation. This booklet reflects the current balance of output and activity and is firmly focused on the first year of the undergraduate experience.

The literature and conference contributions contain numerous illustrations of strategies and exploration of issues from a vast range of scales and contexts. However, it should be acknowledged that reservations have been expressed about the robustness of some of the evidence, in part because reports of innovations do not always include evaluative evidence (see Bovill et al, 2008). Other significant factors relate to the scale of the studies and to the complications associated with the multi-factorial nature of educational innovations. Nonetheless, evaluative evidence is accumulating and the volume of recurrent inferential and associative linkages suggests, as the reports from this Enhancement Theme have articulated and explored, that a range of strategies merit serious consideration.

Furthermore, as presentations at the 3rd European First-Year Experience Conference (2008)[1] demonstrated, there are a growing number of doctoral and other sustained research

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[1] See www.wlv.ac.uk/Default.aspx?page=14030

studies on aspects of the first-year experience, as well as short investigations and evaluations. Qualitative studies dominate the literature, although many of them include quantitative dimensions and a minority employ statistical methods. Two related trends are the increasing desire at institutional level to:

- compare aspects of performance, internally and externally, and/or

- explore potential correlations between performance and other factors such as demographic characteristics, pedagogical approach or prior student experiences and expectations.

Institutions, students and other stakeholders are grappling with an increasingly complex world of HE qualifications. One manifestation that is particularly pertinent here is that the first year can have several meanings depending on the qualification to which the term is being applied. In truth, the model presumed in much of the literature is for entry into the first year of the standard undergraduate degree, be that of three or four years' duration.

However, a considerable number of students in mass HE enter shorter undergraduate programmes (of one or two years' duration), while others enter a specific HEI with advanced standing (that is, direct entry to the second or third year). In doing so they often confront equivalent issues of engagement with their institution, chosen academic studies, staff and peers as those which have attracted much attention in the literature on, and strategies for, enhancing the first-year experience. Both situations can introduce distinctive complications that require adjustments to 'standard' strategies or tailored approaches.

Reference is made in this booklet to other nuances and challenges alongside the following illustrative materials.

3   Promoting academic and social engagement to improve transition, progression and retention

Higher education institutions in many countries are under external pressure to improve rates of student progression and retention. Yet some of the interesting responses, such as those that have become well established in the USA, predate this thrust. They were often focused on enhancing students' engagement with their institution, chosen discipline(s) and peers, and found that improved rates of progression were a welcome by-product.

Wayne Clark, Director of Student Administration at the University of Auckland, has kindly provided a detailed account of this type of strategy: *The UniGuide First Year Support Programme* (Clark, 2008). The principal points from his initial findings are summarised here.

In 2004, the University of Auckland implemented UniGuides, a voluntary academic induction and campus socialisation first-year support programme initiative. This initiative was specifically based on the retention approach that Beatty-Guenter (1992) had articulated, and entailed five components:

- sorting by grouping students into subsets
- enhancing teaching and learning environments
- developing relationships between the student and the institution

- stimulating students to improve attainment levels and skills

- supporting students holistically, including their life outside university.

Participants in UniGuides can opt in and out as they wish. They join and take part in small, faculty-based peer-mentored groups (communities), typically of 8-12 students, designed to help them to develop their student identity and sense of belonging. Clark (2008) has captured the success of UniGuides in terms of improved retention and academic progress. Regarding retention, three years after enrolment in February 2004 nearly 85 per cent of the cohort that joined UniGuides remained enrolled, compared with 68 per cent of the control group (from a sample of 1,000 contemporaries who did not elect to join UniGuides). Likewise, the UniGuide students outperformed the control group by an average of 50 points (credits).

From these findings, Clark concluded that the UniGuides initiative has been a value-added investment for the university and participating students. Of course, since UniGuides only involves a minority of students it is possible that the self-selecting dimension has had an influence, and that the gains cited might not be fully attained if the scheme became comprehensive and compulsory or inherently embedded in institutional practice.

These findings from the University of Auckland broadly match the cumulative experiences of many initiatives to enhance the first-year experience. In Auckland, as has typically occurred elsewhere, the initiative is voluntary and while uptake has been substantial it does not embrace all of the relevant student intake.

Institutions face a difficult dilemma here. If the advantages are directly related to the intervention and not influenced by

other factors, then on equity grounds should the initiative become part of the standard provision for all students? However, might such an enforced strategy endanger student engagement and motivation, which are seen as core ingredients of success? Also, how would enforcement be reconciled with the notion of students' ownership of their learning and the development and nurturing of independent learners? Naturally enough, strategies invariably focus on greater support in the first year, as a precursor to heightened independence and learning responsibility as students progress. Additionally, universal application would present institutions with significant resourcing and organisational challenges. But, as Clark implies, the value argument should prevail if the evidence clearly indicates benefits to students and the institution.

Another illustration of endeavours to promote academic and social engagement is drawn from work at the University of Washington (UW) in the USA. For some time, UW has operated a freshman seminar series at the start of each academic year and topics offered in autumn 2006 included: Modern product research and engineering; Exploring gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues; What is philosophy?; Recovery of function from a central nervous system trauma; DNA dilemmas; and Diversity issues in science. Each seminar has a general education code and is valued at one credit.

A second strand consists of the opportunity for students to enrol in Freshman Interest Groups (FIGS)[2]. The initiative has operated at UW for over 15 years and the university reports that around 70 per cent of freshers register for a FIG. FIGs run in the autumn semester only and are described as 'a pre-packaged cluster of high-demand freshman courses', which are taught in small groups of 20-25 students, with the same

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[2] See www.depts.washington.edu/figs

students in each class. They fulfil general education requirements and allow social networking among students ('form your own UW community').

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

In 2006-07 UW introduced an additional initiative, the UW Common Book, and agreement was reached that all new students would read a common book (Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2003)). The initiative is intended to move the commonality of experience of freshers at UW to a different level, involving the entire intake and linking the common book to their specific studies. UW also planned visits by the author and the subject of the book, Dr Paul Farmer, whom the subtitle describes as 'a man who would cure the world'.

It will be very interesting to read an evaluation of this initiative in a few years' time, particularly to see to what extent UW has managed to achieve the important academic additionality that was a prime purpose of the venture.

Many of the activities at UW demonstrate actions taken in other universities and colleges in the USA, such as first-year seminars and focused interest groups. Indeed, many institutions use variants of common reading, either pre-entry or for focused interest groups or seminar groups. It is the upscaling of the concept at UW that is of interest, combined

with the fact that implementing the idea required acceptance by the different disciplines within the academic community. In addition to pursuing a broader commonality for the first-year student experience at UW, the initiative can also be viewed as a significant step towards academic mainstreaming. Another test, therefore, would be the degree to which this is achieved over time.

4 Perceptions of staff and cultural influences: some Japanese research findings

Yamada (2006) reported on the rapid growth since the late 1990s of interest in first-year seminars in Japanese universities as a strategy for enhancing student motivation. Around 80 per cent of the departmental responses received from her survey of Japanese HEIs indicated that first-year seminars were offered as a 'regular' class in the curriculum.

Yamada outlined four interpretations of the first-year seminar: remedial education; study skills; social skills and general information to aid student success; and specific academic preparation for majors. She observed that the final category was a common response in Japan, but less common in the USA where general education featured more prominently in first-year initiatives.

In 2001, Yamada (2006) conducted a survey of deans and provosts in Japanese HEIs asking how current students compared with those who entered five years ago. On various dimensions, many deans and provosts reported a decline in students' academic skills such as writing, reading and comprehension, and mathematical skills. It appeared that only the most selective Japanese universities did not believe that there had been a deterioration in students' academic skills.

In 2002, Yamada (2008) conducted an equivalent survey of over 1,000 deans and provosts in American universities. From comparative statistical analysis of the Japanese and American samples, she concluded that Japanese universities stressed academic and social skills whereas American institutions

appeared to attach greater emphasis to student affiliation with the institution and programme, cooperative attitude, sense of responsibility and self-esteem. Another important difference was that the American sample only reported declines in mathematical and foreign language skills. In both countries, highly selective universities placed lesser strategic emphasis on skills-related first-year seminars.

Yamada also drew a distinction between the focus of much American work on the impact of college and the traditional perception in Japan that since universities conferred social status and occupational benefits to their students, institutions needed to attach priority to the responsibilities that came with the conferral of a degree.

This research introduced interesting additional dimensions to illuminate international comparison. These dimensions go much deeper than the simple difference in average completion rates in Japan and the USA, even though the substantial difference between the two (with the Japanese average greatly exceeding that of American institutions) is an important contextual feature.

In summary, there is a view in Japan - in the media and within academia - that, with the exception of the most able students, there has been some deterioration over time in the academic skill levels of students entering university. Remedial action was needed if this decline was not to lead to a reduction in the completion rate, so first-year skills seminars were introduced. Yamada (2008) reported broad satisfaction with the outcomes of this strategy, albeit with interdisciplinary variations.

This Japanese research also introduces an important, and perhaps under-explored, dimension of the literature on the first-year experience - namely, what theories and conceptions

(for example, impact of college or personal growth) underpin initiatives? Of course, strategies might seek to combine both dimensions - for example by placing effective learning in an explicit reflective and negotiated framework - but substantial application of that type of approach is not readily identifiable within the literature.

5   The locus, level and scale of initiatives

Many initiatives relating to enhancement of the first-year experience understandably occur at the localised level of a class or course. Much of this work probably does not get reported at conferences or in publications even though it is the major source of first-year experience conference presentations. Where internal funding has been provided to support an initiative, evaluation may be a requirement.

Therefore, one of the challenges surrounding initiatives at what many might view as the most meaningful level of action is that they can readily become so localised that they are almost invisible beyond the boundaries of a department or unit. That presents serious challenges in relation to promoting wider discussions or reflections on practice and effectiveness.

At the opposite end of the spatial scale sit institution-wide initiatives aimed at all first-year students, or for which all first-year students are eligible to apply. Typical examples are skills-related initiatives (for example, IT literacy or library skills) and various schemes of peer support.

From the above, it follows that the locus of activity varies depending on the nature of the initiative. However, it often also reflects organisational considerations. Examples of the latter are initiatives that are lodged, for various reasons, with student affairs, student administration or student associations rather than academic departments. It is perfectly logical that student volunteering might be organised by student associations. However, when such initiatives are required components of academic programmes, arguments shift towards an academic base.

Special organisational arrangements for first-year experience initiatives are commonplace. A particularly distinctive dimension is the use of the university college structure in a number of American universities. The precise roles and administrative structures vary, but commonly the college is led by a dean and charged with particular duties in terms of the first-year experience, such as coordination of freshmen interest groups or other arrangements to support and promote the general education component of the curriculum. Generally, those involved in the functioning of the university college need to form productive partnerships with faculty and with various student-facing support services. Among the perceived advantages are that this structure raises the profile of the first-year experience and provides a visible dedicated resource and source of expertise. However, it can also add to organisational complexity and even result in some measure of organisational confusion and conflict.

For institutional managers, a pragmatic test might be an appropriate measure of effectiveness: for example, does this organisational arrangement deliver the intended strategy? Are there any significant disadvantages and if so how can they be addressed? Institutional managers could also consider an occasional scan to check how other comparable institutions address the matter. Additionally, as Krause (2007) advised, they might want to enhance coordination and cross-institutional action, improve monitoring and reporting, and enable actions in the academic disciplines.

6   Longitudinal data

Institutions are examining trends in relation to the first year. In many HE systems, this can also be undertaken through national data returns of statistics such as those on progression rates and/or entry qualifications. Much less common to date are recurrent national studies of the first-year experience. However, this has been done in Australia and in 2005 the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) published a report by Krause et al which distilled key trends and messages from a decade of national studies on the first-year experience in Australian universities.

The report was arranged in eight sections: CSHE National Studies 1994-2004; Aspirations, changes and uncertainty in the first year; Student expectations and adjustments to university study; Engaging with learners and learning at university; Managing commitments in the first year; Perceptions of teaching and satisfaction with courses; The first-year experience of significant student groups; and Ten years on: trends, transformations and conclusions.

Distilling key trends and messages from 1994 to 2004, the authors highlighted the following (see pages iv-v):

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

- by 2004, occupational aspirations might have been exercising complex influences. Just over 10 per cent deferred enrolment, but the proportion considering deferral or discontinuation had declined to just over 25 per cent of respondents in 2004

- generally, with the exception of international students, there had been a reduction in the proportion of students

feeling that overall experiences at university had not met their expectations

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

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

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

- by 2004, most students accessed online resources and used email for academic (and personal) communication, although online discussions were still atypical

- the 2004 data permitted exploration of demographic subgroups. The authors concluded that, despite similarities of experiences, subgroup differences merited institutional consideration.

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

- the transforming first-year experience

- discussions of student engagement in the first year

- experience of diverse student groups in the first year

- financing undergraduate study and the first-year experience

- enhancing first-year teaching and curriculum
- sustainable and responsive first-year initiatives in universities
- first-year experience research methodologies.

Brief consideration is given here to three topics: transforming, engagement and sustainable initiatives. Those requiring further details should consult the full report[3].

The study found increasing influences of part-time student employment and use of information and communications technology (ICT). At the same time, there had been growth in the number of students enrolled in combined degree programmes. The authors suggested that these trends raised a raft of issues that merited investigation, including possibly a study of academic and support staff's perceptions of implications for pedagogy and student support. They posited that orientation might be a challenge in double-degree problems and also briefly aired possible implications of a more client-centred approach, suggesting that institutions should seek to balance shaping and being shaped by student expectations (see page 87).

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

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[3] www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/publications_resources/profiles/first_year_experience.htm

In 2000, *Trends in the First Year Experience* (McInnis et al) identified various Australian initiatives. In the 2005 DEST study, the authors received positive feedback from students on the success of these initiatives. In summary, they found that first-year transition programmes were widely implemented across Australian institutions, but evidence of evaluation to inform embedding and sustainability was much more limited. They deduced that efforts often depended on individuals or small groups who championed the cause (see page 89).

7   A national resource centre

The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition is located at the University of South Carolina. The current name was adopted in 1988, although the journey started in the early 1970s when the then University President established a taskforce to create a University 101 programme aimed at inculcating students into the behaviours expected of them in HE.

In 1982, the founding Director of the Center and colleagues organised the first national conference on the freshman seminar/freshman orientation course concept. The first international conference took place in 1986 in Newcastle upon Tyne and the 20th international conference in Hawaii in July 2007 attracted some 670 attendees. The Center now organises several sets of annual conferences, arranges a summer institute for deans and department chairs, provides a clearing house for resources, runs a LISTSERV (mailing list server) and produces various publications and reports.

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

The National Resource Center offers services on a subscription basis to institutions worldwide. Institutions in several

countries, including the University of Teesside in the UK, collaborate regularly over the arrangements for the international conference.

It is probably debatable whether other HE systems need, or would agree to establish, their own national resource centres. More pressing agenda items may be ways of connecting expertise, sharing practices and experiences, promoting reflection and dialogue, and possibly commissioning evaluative studies and targeted research projects. Outside the USA there has been a growth of national agencies and bodies with a stake in the fields of educational development and enhancement, which at least in part provide support to institutions, disciplines, students and practitioners.

8 Curriculum change and design

Section 3 of this booklet provided two examples of approaches to fostering learning communities as a means of academic and social engagement. Similarly, strategies targeting skills development can be viewed as enabling empowerment. In both cases these strategies can be embedded within the curriculum, but often they are a means of overcoming curricular difficulties or promoting connectivity which would not necessarily flow naturally from the free functioning of the curriculum in an era of mass HE.

Curriculum design in HE may be an under-researched field. Certainly the literature review for the First-Year Experience Enhancement Theme project on curriculum design (Bovill et al, 2008) concluded that many suggested strategies and innovations did not appear to offer substantive evaluative evidence. Again, this may be because of the internal, often very localised, nature of curriculum design and innovation (that is, within a specific academic programme). Internal institutional quality assurance procedures often require such changes to be justified and monitored when implemented, however, much of that information is not disseminated more widely.

Three other factors may also exercise an influence. In an era of competition for students, departments may be reluctant to share information on curricular change that they hope will give them even a short-term competitive edge. Secondly, many programmes are subject to external accreditation by professional bodies, which frequently have firm views on curricular structure, content and design. Finally, discussions on curriculum within departments can readily become

contentious as different views are aired. Reconciling such differences coherently is challenging.

Three illustrations of curriculum design are given below: one at faculty level, one for a whole institution and one that involves an entire HE system.

Faculty initiative

In the 1990s, Strathclyde Business School (University of Strathclyde, Glasgow) introduced an integrative class into the first-year curriculum with students working in groups/teams on business-related topics. Among the aims were: encouraging students to make connections between the classes they were studying in the first year; promoting learning from and among peers; developing learning communities; and fostering key skills such as teamworking, problem-solving and information literacy.

The innovative philosophy that guided the design was reinforced when the class became a pioneer for a university initiative to promote information literacy and e-learning by allocating laptops to students in a small number of classes.

Evaluation became a requirement because the initiative was centrally funded and a series of reports were made to the relevant university committee on progress and academic benefits. In 2005-06, the Integrative Studies programme was succeeded by the Management Development Programme (MDP), a compulsory component of the first three years of degree programmes at Strathclyde Business School. A case study on the MDP was included in the First-Year Experience Enhancement Theme report on transition (Whittaker, 2008), one of the Enhancement Theme's practice-focused development projects.

Institutional initiative: the Melbourne Model

The University of Melbourne is radically revising its undergraduate curriculum to become the Melbourne Model (University of Melbourne, 2006b). This in turn is intended to facilitate a key institutional objective: the creation of an outstanding and distinctive experience for the university's students.

It would appear that the initial vision came from the Vice-Chancellor and the thinking behind the Strategic Plan, *Growing Esteem* (University of Melbourne, 2006a). The detailed process of debate and articulation was progressed by a broadly based curriculum commission, which met 25 times between February and September 2006. The work of the commission was supported by administrative staff and informed by experts from internal and external sources.

The outcome was a set of recommendations for a new generation of undergraduate courses, pathways into postgraduate coursework programmes and research higher degree programmes, and for the associated coordination and administrative arrangements.

The recommendations on the undergraduate curricula included sections on graduate attributes, core characteristics and disciplinary breadth. Improving cohorts' experience was an important objective of the undergraduate curriculum initiative.

The plans are being implemented shortly, but it will be some time before any evaluative data become available. One interesting signal is that the proposals are reported to have attracted considerable interest among the prospective first cohort of applicants.

System-wide change: Hong Kong

In 2012, Hong Kong's HEIs will switch from a three-year to a four-year structure for most undergraduate programmes. The principal driver for change was a decision to shorten senior secondary education by one year and introduce a new, more broadly based senior school exit qualification. Hong Kong HEIs will have two entry cohorts in 2012: one with the 'old' equivalent of Advanced level qualification and one with the new broader qualification.

Apart from the short-term challenge they face from 2012-13 to around 2015, when the two structures overlap, HEIs in Hong Kong have been wrestling with how to make best use of the switch from a three-year to a four-year normative degree. This is against the background that students in future will have attained a lesser level of pre-entry specialisation.

Some of the evolving institutional discussions and intentions have been outlined in the First-Year Experience Enhancement Theme report *Sector-wide discussion: the nature and purposes of the first year* (Gordon, 2008). Main points include:

- institutions appear to be striving to match their proposals to institutional mission and strategy

- while completion rates are not a significant issue in Hong Kong, there are some concerns that the changes in the school curriculum could lead to gaps in skill levels on entry to HE, especially in relation to mathematical skills

- institutions are being encouraged to use the first year of the four-year degree structure to enable students to sample subjects, deferring the choice of major to the second year

- institutions are taking this opportunity to reflect on various strategies such as effective pedagogical approaches, promoting learning communities, good practice in assessment and feedback, achieving student engagement and fostering motivation, determining which objectives should be prioritised in the first year of study, and how these fit into the wider curricular map of each academic programme.

Hong Kong HEIs are reporting regularly to the Hong Kong Universities Grants Committee on their progress with plans for the switch to the four-year degree structure. It seems likely that they will also include this information in the institutional documentation that forms part of the self-review in the quality processes presently being implemented. A number of institutions have agreed in principle a common core and major/minor programme curricular model.

The opportunity for macro or even meso-scale curricular redesign may be less common than at the level of an academic programme or specific class, and the complexity of the challenge may be substantial. But the potential benefits could be considerable if the connection can be made to institutional strategic objectives, and if the proposals can achieve a credible inter-relationship between vision and ambition, which is informed by research evidence and scholarly analysis.

9 The contribution of Enhancement Themes

Enhancement Themes are designed to support the sector, institutions and key stakeholders by encouraging reflection, sharing illustrations of practice and initiatives, airing issues, exploring solutions and identifying gaps and areas that require further attention. While each Enhancement Theme is intended to be distinctive, it is not designed to be viewed as isolated or unconnected to other Enhancement Themes and strands of work.

Institutional discussions within Scottish HEIs on the First-Year Experience Enhancement Theme demonstrated that connections were recognised, expected and welcomed. For example, references to aspects of the first year have been made in the discussions on the Research-Teaching Links Enhancement Theme, and how research-teaching links (variously defined) impact on the first-year curriculum and student experience.

Several of the First-Year Experience Enhancement Theme reports recognise that the specific topic (for example, assessment, personalisation, curriculum design or PDP) goes beyond the year of study, although there may be particular challenges or aspects associated with the year of entry into HE.

10 Concluding remarks

It is for readers to judge the usefulness of this booklet, which is intended to promote and assist reflection on practices, strategies, challenges and priorities in relation to improving the first-year experience of students. Much may depend on the degree of resonance between an illustration, readers' experiences and the issues they face.

The First-Year Experience Enhancement Theme project that sought student opinions on current provision (Kochanowska and Johnston, 2008) identified a number of significant areas of concern or potential for enhancement. Some of these messages differed from findings from the National Student Survey.

Addressing those issues may entail detailed discussions within institutions. It is suggested that these might usefully be informed by reference to the substantial literature on the first-year experience. Not only could this add illumination, it might even reveal strategies that have been operating successfully elsewhere, aimed at tackling the specific issues of concern - be they in other Scottish HEIs or in some other part of the world.

Material from Japan has been included in this booklet to extend coverage beyond English-speaking countries and to introduce material from an undergraduate system that has historically been viewed as somewhat different from that characterising provision in the USA.

Other international illustrations are contained in several of the associated First-Year Experience Enhancement Theme project reports (see Appendix for full list of reports).

Additionally, readers are directed to the websites of the several first-year experience conferences scheduled to take place in 2008:

- www.wlv.ac.uk/default.aspx?page=17310

- www.sc.edu/fye/events/international/

- http://academic.sun.ac.za/fyeconference2008

- www.fyhe.qut.edu.au

These remarks are not intended to imply that Scottish HEIs are, or should be, in any sense passive recipients of 'distilled wisdom' from elsewhere. Not only are active engagement and critical assessment vital, but the work of this Enhancement Theme has demonstrated that Scottish HEIs have valuable experiences to share with others.

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12 Appendix:
Quality Enhancement Themes
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