Building Resilient Learning Communities: Using Evidence to Support Student Success

Key messages from the 5th International Enhancement Conference, October 2020

QAA Scotland welcomed over 400 delegates from 27 countries to the 5th International Enhancement Conference – 'Building Resilient Learning Communities'. Sharing innovative thinking, learning, tools and practice, drawn from the Enhancement Themes and across the globe, the event explored: the use of evidence-based decision-making; equality, diversity and inclusion in our learning communities; and employability for a changed world. Delegates were encouraged to reflect on their practice and their role in supporting and contributing to resilient learning communities during this complex time. The following key messages have been drawn from the event's plenary programme.

Data-driven decision-making

Digital technology and data should inform institutional decision-making. As we heard throughout the event, technology is not neutral and, therefore, it is just as important that the higher education sector should engage in deep thinking about how technology can be used to ensure its shared values and purpose are retained in decision-making processes.

We were invited to refocus on the transformational nature of higher education, rather than seeing education purely as an economic instrument or a means to avoiding unemployment. To do this, the higher education sector must re-evaluate the purpose and values of universities to ensure they fit with and respond to a post-pandemic world.

The shift to emergency remote learning and teaching has demonstrated that institutions can react quickly to social and technological changes. We need to ensure that we understand the potential of technologies, use them in pedagogically sound ways, and critically assess the technology to ensure that it does not promote unconscious biases.

> So, what values and purposes are we pursuing in such an experimental moment? Values of equality, fairness, access, quality education for all have become key issues, particularly to address digital inequalities.
>
> *Dr Ben Williamson*

Equitable learning communities

Intentional, equitable learning communities require educators to place care at the centre of their learning and teaching practice. Academic and professional services staff should receive professional development which is focused on the promotion of agency, ownership, care and equity to support their encouragement of agency and equity in student learning spaces.

The black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) awarding gap challenges the concept that attending university is an equally transformational experience for all students. Institutions require systematic and research-informed approaches, which utilise staff expertise, to address the awarding gap. It is likely that culture change will be required and at all levels, from the Vice-Chancellor and Board of Governors through to academic and professional services staff and students. Ownership of this change needs to be felt regardless of where individuals are placed in an institution.

Transforming the curricula can support the creation of equitable learning communities. To do this pedagogy, curricula and assessments need to be meaningful and accessible for all students. Students should be engaged as partners in this work and the best institutions recognise that students need support to equip and empower them to contribute to the curricular transformation.

Accessible learning communities

The widescale digital delivery of learning and teaching has been positive for some students with additional support needs, specifically those with mobility issues, although the transition online has not 'levelled the playing field' for students. Different barriers, like those experienced by students with visual disabilities or who struggle with digital poverty, have emerged and need to be addressed. Academic and support staff are encouraged to speak with individual students to identify the support they need in an online environment. Keeping it real in the virtual world involves ensuring that point of human contact and connection remains an important feature of supporting students.

Digital delivery has presented the opportunity for greater flexibility in learning and teaching. Students expect choice - options, even minimal options, around assessment and engagement can address accessibility issues for students. Remote learning has highlighted the benefits of students having the opportunity to co-create and choose assessment formats that support their style of learning.

Institutional support for staff is central to the development and promotion of accessible learning communities. Staff should not be expected to act as the sole contact for supporting students but should be empowered to signpost students to relevant support mechanisms within the institution.

> *Curriculum must offer opportunities for mixing with students, learning about and appreciating different perspectives and encouraging students to value their own contributions as well as those of others. They then need to carry these values into the workplace.*
> *Nona McDuff, OBE*

Developing graduate skills

Change is not new. A recently declining job market for graduates has been exacerbated by COVID-19. It has also worsened inequality among students, as graduates will not all have equal access to financial support if they are unable to secure employment. Institutional employability initiatives need to address this inequality.

Embedding employability should be seen by institutions as achievable and a fundamental part of curriculum design. An effective approach is likely to be data-driven, centred in the curriculum, compulsory, engaging staff and communicated as a life-long commitment for students. Assessments should be framed as 'professional artefacts', particularly group work, and present an opportunity for students to create something valuable for their future careers. Students should be encouraged to view themselves as professionals in their field from the outset of their studies.

Engaging effectively with industry is key to the success of employability and entrepreneurship initiatives. Opportunities to develop skills, whether in-class or in placements, needs to be tailored to the degree programme. Employability and entrepreneurship are not one-size-fits-all ventures.

Where do we go from here?

There is a sense that this is a moment of change and opportunity for the sector, which necessitates resilience, continuing relevance and the empowerment of learners. The shift to digital learning will not replace in-person teaching. It has highlighted the need for the sector to focus on mental wellbeing, tackling loneliness, and adopting flexible learning and working practices. The sector must reflect on the ways that digital approaches to learning and teaching can enhance community and belonging.

How do we, as a sector, understand 'inclusivity', 'accessibility', 'exclusion' and 'digital poverty'? We must be willing to respond to the diversity of people's experiences, to feel uncomfortable and take risks. Positive steps have been taken to improve the diversity and inclusivity of higher education, but the sector needs to continue to pursue positive change and enhancement.

Recognise the efforts and commitment of academic and professional service staff during this period of uncertainty. Safeguard their mental health through practical means, whether institutional rest days, formal recognition of work or fun alternatives to community building. Leading with empathy and positivity is key.

What happens next?

QAA Scotland looks forward to continuing its work as part of the 2020-23 Enhancement Theme, Resilient Learning Communities, in partnership with staff and student colleagues from across the sector.