PROGRAMME LEADERSHIP: Strengthening Resilience, Supporting Learning Communities

Overview of Collaborative Cluster Activity (January - June 2021)

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PROGRAMME LEADERSHIP IN CONTEXT

The Enhancing Support for Programme Leadership Collaborative Cluster initiated under the *Evidence For Enhancement* Theme (2017-20) brought together colleagues from across the Scottish HE sector to explore emerging issues related to enhancing learning, teaching and student support at programme level. The cluster encouraged sharing of practice and the broad appreciation of the diverse sources of evidence and support for practical pedagogic action for enhancement that Programme Leaders engaged in. Working together and sharing expertise enabled us to better understand the diversity of approaches taken to programme leadership within and across our institutions and to identify areas for further learning and development. This broad approach was instrumental in expanding sector and institutional focus on the pivotal role of this often under-recognised and under-supported group of staff, and an unexpected outcome of the cluster was its elevation of the PL role across the sector.

PROGRAMME LEADERSHIP IN A TIME OF CRISIS

Through 2020-21, the pivotal role of programme leaders as mediators between institutional policy and individual staff and student experience has been further brought to the fore through the Covid-19 response. Rapid institutional change is being implemented, with programme leaders playing a key role in interpreting, communicating and applying these changes in context relevant ways. The challenges of the pandemic also highlighted the pivotal position of programme leads as providers of support both to students on the programme and to colleagues navigating this unprecedented disruption to university learning and teaching.

At this time of change, redoubling efforts to support programme leaders to develop their own skills and resilience is vital, both to upskill and empower this particular group and to strengthen the programme

and course teams whose work they frame and enhance. The Programme Leadership Collaborative Cluster re-convened to continue to shine light on this group of staff and consider how to further amplify the key educational leadership role they play within our institutions and across the sector.

> The challenges of the Covid pandemic have highlighted the pivotal position of Programme Leaders as providers of support to students and to colleagues navigating this unprecedented disruption to university learning and teaching.

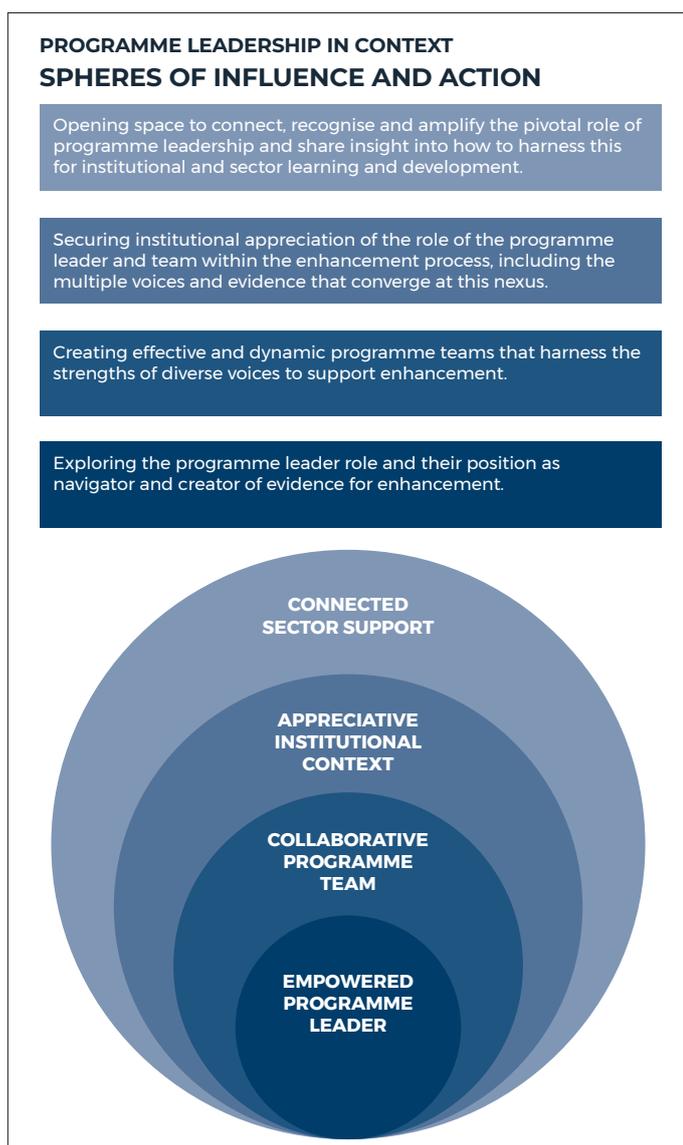### RESILIENCE AND PROGRAMME LEADERSHIP

The key purpose of this sector-wide activity was to deepen community and collaboration between programme leaders across the Scottish university sector and beyond at a time of challenge and uncertainty. The January-June 2020 period was arguably the most challenging period of the pandemic for educational leadership, with levels of collective fatigue across the student and staff community reaching a peak. The PL Cluster sought to create a sense of connection and support across the PL community, offering opportunities to connect beyond the everyday institutional network and everyday patterns of online

meetings and interactions. By creating spaces for connection and discussion, the Cluster aimed to facilitate the sharing and development of PL practice, open space to consider what educational leadership really meant in this context, and the reframing of sector debate around the recognition and reward of programme leaders as agents of enhancement and change.

OVERVIEW OF CLUSTER ACTIVITY

The Programme Leadership Cluster focused on bringing programme leaders, aspirant PLs, and those who support them within institutions together to explore key themes, share practice, and offer mutual support at a time of particular challenge. The work was deliberately framed to address the different spheres of influence and action identified through the first block of programme leadership work (as part of the Evidence for Enhancement Theme).

- Empowering Programme Leaders
- Creating Collaborative Programme Teams
- Building Appreciative Institutional Contexts
- Connecting Sector Support to PLs

PROGRAMME LEADERSHIP IN CONTEXT
SPHERES OF INFLUENCE AND ACTION

Opening space to connect, recognise and amplify the pivotal role of programme leadership and share insight into how to harness this for institutional and sector learning and development.

Securing institutional appreciation of the role of the programme leader and team within the enhancement process, including the multiple voices and evidence that converge at this nexus.

Creating effective and dynamic programme teams that harness the strengths of diverse voices to support enhancement.

Exploring the programme leader role and their position as navigator and creator of evidence for enhancement.

CONNECTED SECTOR SUPPORT

APPRECIATIVE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

COLLABORATIVE PROGRAMME TEAM

EMPOWERED PROGRAMME LEADER

Specific outputs to help achieve this agreed were agreed at the start of the Cluster. These were:

- **A series of four online workshops**, open to all across the Scottish sector and beyond.Commencing with a broad framing discussion the series was then to lead into focused discussions on specific areas of pedagogic practice and leadership development. It was intended that each session would incorporate insights from institutional practice.

  In practice, the Cluster held six online workshop sessions (see Table 1), an initial start-up session plus five themed discussions. These webinars and summary Sketchnotes can be found on the **Programme Leadership page of the Enhancement Themes site**.

- **Pilot a network of action learning sets for PLs across Scottish HEIs.**

  Programme Leaders from Scottish HEIs were invited to join self-directed action learning sets. Participants were connected in groups of c. 6 people from across the sector and were encouraged to meet and support each other over the academic year, using the four online workshops as stimulus for sharing and shaping their practice.

- **A series of think pieces** prepared by the workshop leads and a **collection of short case studies of practice** developed by the programme leader action learning sets.

  These Thinkpieces / case studies have been produced and shared via the PL Cluster site, with a further set in production. Case study insights were incorporated into the presentations at the workshops and in the summary Sketchnotes.

- **A short overview report, outlining and reflecting on practice across the programme of work**.

The planned programme of work built on the strong sector-wide collaboration that developed around the collaborative cluster on Enhancing Programme Leadership under the previous themes. The steering group that directed that Cluster reconnected for this work, building on the strong working relationship they have established and extending the networks they have already put in train across the sector. The intention is that at the end of this cluster there will be an extended set of leaders in this area, enabling the programme leadership network to become embedded in QAA Scotland's enhancement practice and in sector wide outreach, support and engagement.

EMERGING THEMES: RESILIENCE IN ACTION

As the cluster activity developed through 2021, there emerged collective appreciation of the significance of the role and the breadth and depth of support that individuals in these positions require to truly flourish as educational leaders.

PROGRAMME LEADERSHIP IN A TIME OF CRISIS

The pivotal institutional position of Programme leaders has become ever more apparent in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, with PLs highlighting the extent they have been offering out direct support to colleagues and to students alongside navigating changes in assessment, teaching and professional body requirements. The complexity of this role has been amplified by the increased centralisation evident across many institutions in learning and teaching decision-making, with new frameworks designed to respond at pace to the pandemic restrictions having to be understood, reframed and appropriately adapted for specific programme implementation.

PROGRAMME LEADERS AND PEDAGOGIC TRANSFORMATION

Related to working through and within the Covid-19 pandemic, Programme Leaders have noted a new approach to strategic planning, and the articulating of an institution's processes and habits through its strategy documents. Solutions and often improved procedures have emerged since March 2020, and several examples have been shared of those new procedures being adopted more officially and more widely. This relates to everyday programme management as much as it does to (for example) confidence in blended learning and teaching.

This is particularly important as we recognise the scale and rate of change that has occurred over the last eighteen months, described by one programme leader as 'ten years of progress in a year and a half'.

PROGRAMME LEADERSHIP AS EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

It is increasingly obvious that programme leadership draws extensively on non-context-specific leadership skills. These apply to leading the group of people who form the (often nebulous) programme team, being able to see both the (long-term) big picture and the (short-term) daily minutiae, having confidence in one's own ideas, protecting time for 'leading' as well as for 'doing', and so on.

Most programme leaders are still required to do a good deal of teaching. They are generally the first point-of-contact for students with non-academic issues and concerns. They are not hidden away – they are 'on the shop floor'. They have close relationships with members of the programme team, often forged while equals in the institutional hierarchy. They might be task managing a lot of people, but without the benefit of line managerial authority.

All of the above points towards the need for being the figurehead of a programme to be elevated from the management domain to the leadership domain.

ENGAGING STUDENTS IN PROGRAMME ENHANCEMENT

The pandemic context cast fresh light on the power of student engagement in programme developments and the importance of programme community to the student learning experience. Programme leaders highlighted the significant additional communication and support offered out to students and the importance of broad-based connections alongside formal student representative structures. Examples of practice included programme-wide Townhall-style events to share and connecting students through whole community learning events beyond individual course-based sessions.

Learning from the emergency context offers a useful framing for understanding some of the core challenges associated with supporting student engagement in programme enhancement. Specifically, it offers a route in to a more comprehensive basis for partnerships for learning and co-design of programmes, beyond the focus on NSS or course evaluation interactions.

TABLE 1. PROGRAMME LEADERSHIP CLUSTER SEMINAR OUTLINE 2021

18th January	**Resilient Programme Leadership: An introduction to the work of the Cluster** **Sam Ellis (RCS)** **Martha Caddell (Heriot-Watt University)** **Julie Blackwell Young (University of Abertay)**
28th January	**Thriving in the Winds of Change: Programme leadership around the globe** **Jenny Lawrence, University of Hull** Programme Leading is becoming a role prized for its opportunity to exercise academic agency and is increasingly understood as integral to career progression. In this webinar we explored a suite of successful initiatives that support the practice and enhance the academic standing of programme leaders from universities across the globe. It considered what actions really make a difference for individuals, the programmes they lead and the students they support.

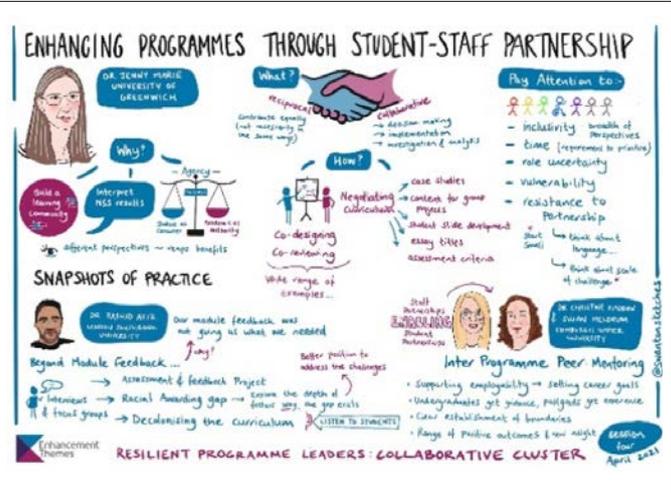|		
18th February	**Programme Leadership: Exploring Recognition, Reward & Resilience** Andie Webb, University of British Columbia **Case Study** **Rachel McGregor: Robert Gordon University** This session and explored how educational leadership is understood within institutions and how it is supported and recognised in promotion and reward processes. It offered an opportunity to consider how programme leaders understand and frame the extrinsic and intrinsic value of their role as academic leaders. A particular focus throughout the session was on the scholarship of learning, teaching and educational leadership as a source of value, motivation and reward	
18th March	**Developing Resilient Pedagogies Programme Approaches to Assessment** **Kimberly Wilder-Davis (University of Glasgow)** **Alex Buckley (Heriot-Watt University)** **Bryden Stillie (Edinburgh Napier University)** In recent years, there has been a growing interest in universities promoting a more holistic approach to assessment and feedback. This programme-focused approach provides opportunities to support students so that they better understand how to move through their programme of study, and helps equip them with the skills needed to be self-regulated learners both within the programme and beyond.	
26th April	**Enhancing Programmes Through Student-Staff Partnership** Dr Jenny Marie (University of Greenwich) **Case Studies** **Christine Haddow and Susan Meldrum (Edinburgh Napier University)** **Rashid Aziz (London South Bank University)** Student-staff partnership can aid the work of programme leaders in a number of ways: helping them to build a learning community of staff and students, supporting the interpretation of data about their programme, and giving agency back to programme leaders, teachers and students. This session provided examples of how this can be done.	
20th May	**Less Alone Than You Think: Supporting Programme Leadership** **The Collaborative Cluster Leadership Team** **Case Study** **Eva Malone and Steve Yorkstone (Edinburgh Napier University)** The final discussion session offered an opportunity for programme leaders to share experience from across the Cluster themes, highlighting the imperative of raising the professional recognition and practical support offered to colleagues in such key educational leadership roles.	
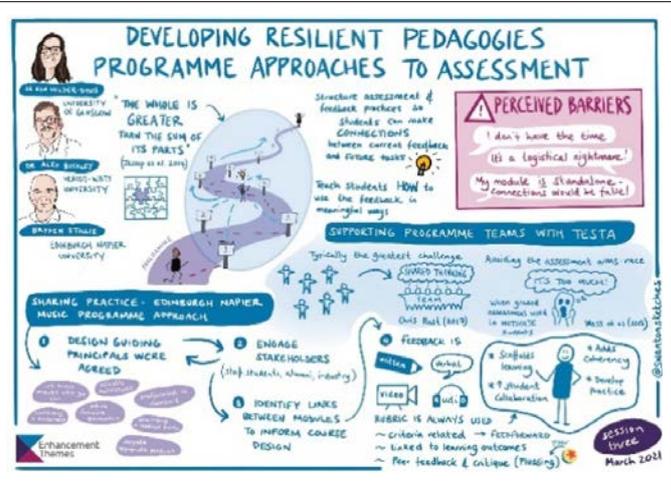
DEVELOPING THE ACTION LEARNING SETS

The cross-sector Action Learning Sets (ALS) were intended to bring small groups of Programme Leaders, aspiring Programme Leaders and those who support Programme Leaders together to discuss issues, concerns and challenges they were facing in their roles and get support from peers.

We based the Action Learning Set methodology on the process developed by Advance HE for their Aurora Leadership programme. This involves participants meeting online and each participant choosing an issue that they wish to present to the rest of the group for discussion. They take five minutes to outline the issue and then the rest of the group ask clarifying questions followed by probing questions. The task of the group is not to offer solutions (and this is discouraged) but through answering questions designed to stimulate learning, understanding, action and to explore options, the participant with the issue can gain some insight into their issue and come up with their own solution or plan of action. Each group was asked to come up with their own ground rules about how the sets would run, with the suggestion that the total time in the ALS would be around three hours, allowing thirty minutes for each participant to present their issue and have a discussion around it.

Attendees at the first workshop were asked to complete an Expression of Interest form if they wished to be allocated to an ALS and the link was also distributed through QAA communications and Twitter. Forty-nine responses were received and distributed into seven groups. Twelve Scottish HEIs were represented and two Welsh universities. As far as possible the ALS were split so that there were not two participants from the same institution. This was to make the ALS as much of a safe space as possible. However, this was not always achievable, particularly with the last couple of ALS which were set up after most of the other groups had been established due to the PL Cluster extending the deadline for expressions of interest.

An ALS evaluation form was created to gain feedback from participants on their experiences and the impact on their practice. At the time of this report, we have not yet had many formal responses from ALS participants, however, we have had some informal feedback on the experience. It has become clear that some ALS have not worked as well as planned. It seems that some groups met once but then were unable to organise subsequent meetings. This meant that not all participants were able to have their issue discussed and so have not had that positive experience. Unfortunately, we didn't hear about these until the end of the Cluster work and so were not able to re-allocate sets. However, other ALS have blossomed and are still meeting regularly to discuss PL related issues and also consider relevant research and publications.

In terms of lessons learnt from this activity, giving a bit more structure around the ALS would be beneficial. This would include having a cut-off date followed by a briefing/induction event before the ALS start and keeping in touch more whilst the ALS are running. This would hopefully prevent some of the issues we have seen and also allow us to find out about any issues at an earlier stage where we could support participants to get the most of their experience.

EVALUATING CLUSTER ACTIVITY

Since the inception of this phase of the PL Cluster work, we have remained focused on opportunities to evaluate and capture learning from events and activities. Our evaluation approach aims to explore the key role that has been played by PLs in rapid institutional and programme change required by the Covid-19 pandemic, and share best practice. The activity and impact of the cluster will be explored with reference to the following research questions:

- To what extent has the collaborative cluster fostered and strengthened the development of a PL community? What has been the impact of this collaboration on the practice of those involved?

- What does resilience mean to PLs and programme teams? How can this be supported and fostered in practice?

- What role do programme leaders play in times of crisis and pedagogic transformation? What learning has been shared about rapid changes to LTA approaches in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and their impact?

The cluster team have also developed the following indicators through which we are assessing the impact of the cluster work.

Timescale	Indicators
Short Term	Increased opportunities for PLs in Scotland to connect at sector level including: - Attendance at webinars - Participation in action learning sets
Medium Term	Sharing of best practice and collaboration among cluster participants including: - Discussions/case studies from action learning sets - Contributions to Thinkpieces
Long Term	The development of a strengthened PL community which can begin to work directly with QAA Scotland

EVALUATION MATERIALS

A short summary of data we have collected during the period of cluster activity to feed into our evaluation work is as follows:

- **Roundtable Recordings:** These will allow us to review workshop discussions to identify key themes, insights for practice and challenges identified by participants during sessions.

- **Pre/Post event questionnaires:** Questionnaires were distributed prior to and following events to collect pre workshop insights from participants in areas of thematic interest (e.g. resilience) and to identify the main learning which participants have taken from the sessions.

- **Padlet:** Our final session included a group activity carried out on Padlet. All groups were asked to provide comments and insights in relation to key questions identified across the course of the cluster. This has allowed us to capture insights from PLs in areas such as creativity in programme leadership, required and desired skills, and perceptions of the ideal programme team, which will be developed into thematic findings.

- **Cluster Evaluation Questionnaire:** Following the final workshop event, a questionnaire via MS Forms was sent to all cluster participants to gather feedback. This will allow us to identify key learning from the cluster activity and provide insight into how we can improve in future.

- **ALS Evaluation Questionnaire:** A separate evaluation questionnaire was also distributed to those who participated in action learning sets and aimed to identify what has been gained from participating in these and how collaborations have enhanced experiences of programme leadership this trimester.

> As Programme Leaders, we are all having the same struggle. It is good to know that you are not alone and sharing the experience gives you some ideas to overcome your own challenges.

EMERGING FINDINGS AND IMPACT FROM THE CLUSTER ACTIVITY

Our data collection for the evaluation is ongoing and we are still engaging with participants to maximise responses to the instruments outlined above. Preliminary evidence suggests that Cluster short and medium term indicators have been met as follows:

- **Short Term:** Increased opportunities for PLs in Scotland to connect at sector level have been evidenced through attendance at webinars (404 participants) and participation in action learning sets (49 participants). The spread of institutions represented at webinar events was broad with 41 different institutions represented, including 18 of Scotland's universities and interest from across the English and Welsh sector and beyond.

- **Medium Term:**
  + Sharing of best practice has been evidenced through contributions to webinars and to Thinkpieces. As noted elsewhere in this report, the core thinkpieces have been developed and disseminated. However due to the pressures of the year, the full suite of sharing practice case studies will be completed over the summer.

  + Collaboration among cluster participants has been evidenced as a key benefit of action learning set discussions so far, anecdotally we have been advised that many of the groups intend to continue working together and are developing their own research projects in the area. Initial responses to the evaluation questionnaires also indicate this, with groups continuing to meet regularly and support each other to explore their roles and interests.

There are also a number of key themes emerging across responses which evidence the benefits of this cluster activity:

- **Tackling Isolation:** Discussion in workshops and in responses often indicated that participants felt isolated in their role. The cluster activity gave participants an insight into the (often shared) problems that PLs in other institutions were experiencing and provided a platform to discuss these:

  > *"As Programme Leaders, we are all having the same struggle. It is good to know that you are not alone and sharing the experience gives you some ideas to overcome your own challenges."*

This has been particularly significant during the pandemic, where PLs are working remotely and may have reduced access to supportive networks within their institutions.

- **Building esteem:** Initial responses indicate that the cluster has been successful in building esteem for participants. They describe a change in perspective on what/who they feel empowered to influence within their own institutions and a sense of advocacy for PLs:

"The PL role does not have to be linear - just like the analogy of the Queen in chess, disseminating good practice and scholarship can go in many directions."

"It is important to lobby the institution [for] dedicated time for educational leadership and this is not 'more teaching'."

- **Creating a platform:** Participants' feedback has indicated that engaging in the cluster activity has inspired them to create or contribute to dissemination of best practice and scholarship from PLs within their own institution:

  I have already reached out to colleagues in UK HEIs to discuss their response to practical teaching during the pandemic - to learn lessons and implement good practice in my own institution."

  "I'm going to see if I can find PLs who have a scholarship story they would like to share and give them a platform for internal dissemination amongst other Scholarship projects."

These comments suggest that the cluster has the potential for lasting impact within HEIs and may go beyond those who attended sessions.

The Cluster Team continues to collect feedback and responses from participants to strengthen the dataset for the research and evaluation activity. Further publication and dissemination of findings will continue into AY2021-22.

REFLECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS
There has been a distinctly different character to this block of programme leadership work, with the urgency of support and vital nature of the PL role amplified by the pandemic context.

Participation in cluster activity has been shaped by a greater proportion of PLs engaging in the work as compared with the previous iteration, which centred more on those who were supporting PLs and / or leading institutional initiatives to support PL practice. The extensive participation by colleagues currently in a programme leadership role led to a greater focus on peer-support and on multi-institutional conversation. Given the context in which the cluster activity was taking place, the interest in finding thinking space and time for discussion and collaboration within the webinars and through the Action Learning Space is striking. Engaging beyond an individual's home institution seems of particular significance to participants – offering an external viewpoint and opportunity for connections to be made that otherwise would not be possible.

Cluster discussion really lit up around the theme of educational leadership and the importance scholarship in defining and amplifying the programme leadership role. This theme can be tracked through all the discussion points and framed thinking – and action – in a number of the Action Learning Sets. Whilst time and mobility were restricted through this period of work, the focus on scholarship of educational leadership as a basis for further enhancing support for programme leadership and boosting the esteem in which the role is held.

Finally, working across the sector and opening doors for external collaboration is vital in enabling PLs to see the bigger picture of educational transformation in which they play a key role. With programme leadership still, in practice, focusing on the management and operational aspects of supporting learning and ensuing effective engagement of the teaching team, opportunities to stand back and consider the wider HE landscape and the possibilities open to reshape programmes and approaches to leadership remain rare and are highly valued. Action Learning Sets, with appropriate support to amplify their impact and share common interests, seems an approach worthy of further exploration and development.

The ongoing research and evaluation work being led by the current Cluster Leadership Team will offer out more formal recommendations for next steps to shape both the conceptual understanding of resilient programme leadership and the practical support mechanisms that will truly make a difference to those working in these roles (or aspiring to them). These will be disseminated through the autumn of 2021, as final data analysis and conceptual work is completed.

NEXT STEPS FOR ENHANCING PRACTICE
The Resilient Programme Leadership Cluster has offered a valuable point of connection and practical space to share practice and enhancement approaches at a time of considerable disruption. There appears to be an appetite for continued development of the network and a sustained focus on educational leadership and on developing scholarship in this area of HE practice. As this block of work draws to a close the emerging findings from this report suggest that:

- Further work to connect programme leaders across the Scottish sector (and beyond) would be welcome and meet a need not readily available to PLs across the sector. The modest injection of financial support through the Collaborative Cluster approach allows colleagues who would not otherwise have the opportunity to build external networks to do so.

- Scholarship activity focused on key aspects of programme leadership could offer opportunities for structured and targeted peer support whilst contributing to raising the profile and esteem of individuals involved – and of programme leadership more broadly. It would be useful to offer seedcorn funding, in the form of mini-projects, to support Action Learning Sets to form and shared activities to develop under the umbrella of a shared agenda to enhance programme leadership.

- Conceptual reframing of the programme leadership role is important to advance understanding of higher education leadership and to assist with the reframing and re-orientating of promotion, recognition and reward pathways. A strong sector-wide voice for programme leadership and development of **A Manifesto for Programme Leadership** would offer a pragmatic next step for collaborative, pan-Scotland activity in this area.

Key to the further deepening of support for Programme Leaders and enhancing their resilience is sustaining space for connection and the building of the prestige, appreciation and support for the role. Any future work should have this firmly at its heart.

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