Resilient Learning Communities

Institutional Plan for: Abertay University

This document is intended to be a cumulative plan for your institution, which you will add to year on year as the Theme progresses. At the end of the Theme, this document will show how plans may have developed and changed over time. The plan for each year should be around three to four sides of A4.

Italicised text in this document can be removed as it is advisory.

Context

Provide any statements that might be helpful in explaining your institution's context and approach and how this plan supports the achievement of institutional priorities. In subsequent years, any context statement could draw on salient points from the previous year's learning/outcomes and reflect any changes in the strategic direction of your institution.

Institutional team

Please specify for each member whether staff or student and for staff, their role title. Where the Theme Leaders' Group (TLG) staff or student nominee is unable to attend meetings, an alternate can attend on their behalf. This need not be named individuals, which may help support Theme involvement across a range of staff and students.

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Institutional lead	Luke Millard	Luke Millard	Luke Millard
TLG staff representative	Luke Millard, Dean of Teaching and Learning	Luke Millard, Dean of Teaching and Learning	Luke Millard, Dean of Teaching and Learning
TLG student representative	Daniela Bandeva, President of Student Association	President of Student Association or nominee	President of Student Association or nominee
Add additional rows for additional members	Julie Blackwell Young, Quality Enhancement Manager	Julie Blackwell Young, Quality Enhancement Manager	Julie Blackwell Young, Quality Enhancement Manager
		Claire MacEachen, School Head of	Claire MacEachen, School Head of

	Claire MacEachen, School Head of Teaching Quality & Learning Enhancement	Teaching Quality & Learning Enhancement	Teaching Quality & Learning Enhancement
	James Nicholson, Director of Student an Academic Services	James Nicholson, Director of Student an Academic Services	James Nicholson, Director of Student an Academic Services
	Liz MacDougall, Senior Language & Learning Development Advisor	Liz MacDougall, Senior Language & Learning Development Advisor	Liz MacDougall, Senior Language & Learning Development Advisor
	Jan Law, School Student Academic Adviser	Jan Law, School Student Academic Adviser	Jan Law, School Student Academic Adviser
	Abertay Learning Enhancement (AbLE) Academy student consultant	Abertay Learning Enhancement (AbLE) Academy student consultant	Abertay Learning Enhancement (AbLE) Academy student consultant
	Andrea Cameron, Dean of School of Applied Sciences	Andrea Cameron, Dean of School of Applied Sciences	Andrea Cameron, Dean of School of Applied Sciences
	Jim Huntingford, Head of Library Services	Jim Huntingford, Head of Library Services	Jim Huntingford, Head of Library Services
	Ruth Falconer Head of Division, School of Design and Informatics	Ruth Falconer Head of Division, School of Design and Informatics	Ruth Falconer Head of Division, School of Design and Informatics

Planned activity: Year 1

Overall outcomes/activity

What are your key priorities?

What outcomes do you want to achieve?

What activities will you deliver?

What do you anticipate will be the benefits at sector and institutional levels?

Through the theme of building resilient learning communities, Abertay University plans to renew and reinvigorate its focus on retention related activities. In particular, we will focus on the entry points into University which in Abertay's case occur at year one, year two and year three, and include recruitment through articulations with partner colleges.

Student abilities, learning habits, behaviours and expectations will all vary as they join the university at these various entry points and our focus will be on how we meet and exceed expectations ensuring a smooth and successful transition into the Abertay community. This will provide the opportunity to deliver relationship-rich education[1]

This will see the University embark on activities that create, explore and embed:

- Diagnostic testing of students;
- Curriculum redesign through selective block delivery of learning;
- New approaches to orientation and the 'relentless welcome';
- Student Life Coaching;
- Engaging microcredits to develop successful student attributes and skills;
- Mentoring as an integrated retention approach.

This approach is founded upon the belief asserted by Pascarella & Terenzini (2005:647) that "*the greatest impact* (on success) *appears to stem from students' total level of campus engagement, particularly when academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular involvements are mutually reinforcing*". The challenge for us at Abertay is not necessarily ensuring that each activity listed works, but making sure that their impact is greater than the sum of its parts.

The activities above will initiate in year one and evolve throughout the thematic period. In addition, we would wish to explore a longer term project around how we make our university 'student ready'[2]. This will see a systems focus that explores the institutional and regulatory barriers that challenge the university to be 'student ready' and to be prepared to welcome and engage with students in an effective manner .

The benefits for the University around the approaches outlined above would be evidenced through improving retention figures. In addition, we anticipate that student and staff satisfaction will improve through this move to a 'relationship rich education' in which students, mentors and staff engage in new ways. The literature has spoken of developing a 'sense of belonging' (Thomas 2012) and before that a 'sense of mattering and membership' (McMillan and Chavis 1085). Through the development of relationships

---

[1] P Felten and L Lambert (2020) – Relationship Rich Education – JH Press
[2] T McNair et al (2016) – Becoming a Student Ready College – Jossey Bass

whether they be peer to peer, student to mentor or student to staff we believe that we can show students that they matter and introduce the notion of care that students will recognise and embrace.

Year 1 outcomes/activity

What are your key priorities?

What outcomes do you want to achieve?

What activities will you deliver?

What do you anticipate will be the benefits at sector and institutional levels?

Diagnostic Testing of Students

Abertay is the lead partner on the QAA Collaborative Cluster project Personalised Approaches to Resilience and Community (PARC).

Standard approaches to university admission see students meet the criteria for acceptance and then receive a standardised cohort experience through their induction and initial learning journey. However, as a sector we are well aware that students enter our universities with a diverse range of abilities and skills. For most of the Universities in this cluster the focus on access for widening participation students means that this is a very real and urgent challenge. Recognising technological deprivation and supporting transition into HE for widening participation students is becoming increasingly important as societal differences are becoming clearer. The partners in this bid bring great expertise in this area with Abertay ranked 1st in Scotland for Social Inclusion; GCU ranked 4th in Scotland and BCU ranked 19th in England and Wales in the 2021 Sunday Times Good University Guide.

The cluster wishes to develop, implement and evaluate activities that better prepare the individual student to be successful. It will take a direct approach to targeting and supporting student need and utilise diagnostic testing of students on pre-arrival/arrival. This will see a diagnostic test(s), previously piloted at Birmingham City University, to review student academic skills, numeracy, wellbeing and digital competence. This approach arose out of BCU's participation in the HEFCE/OfS Learning Gain initiative. The focus on the individual is even more relevant at this time as the sector moves to offer new and untested blended approaches to learning which will potentially have an increasingly isolating impact on students. To acclimatise those students and ensure they are retained there is a real need to connect with the individual student and offer them a tailored approach to developing successful study habits and skills (Vanthournout et al 2016).

The partners will collaborate to identify the mechanisms by which they will best utilise the data generated by the diagnostic, building on the learning analytics work developed in the last enhancement theme and focusing on community development. Outcomes are likely to be generated at the micro, meso and macro levels. Primarily students will gain direct feedback on their strengths and challenges, setting expectations and building connections across the university community. Partners may choose to target peer mentoring programmes, personal tutors/academic advisers to offer individual consultancy to students. At the meso level, programme teams and departments will receive feedback on the nature of their student cohort which will help them to create programme/dept based community interventions (Thomas and Jones, 2016) and also help them reshape curriculum to address previously unidentified issues (Curran and Millard, 2015). At the macro level it can inform

universities and central services around the culture that is generated (Lizzio, 2010); the interventions that are designed (Tinto, 2016) and even the way in which students are recruited.

The partners will work together to share approaches and lessons learned as staff and students engage in the scenarios outlined. In particular, we believe that there may be some cultural elements that need to be surfaced especially with regard to international students and colleagues at Warwick are keen to explore that area of intrigue. The role of the Students' Union/Association in integrating with these new approaches will also be explored as student engagement in community will be key to ensuring student success.

The work of the cluster will be to determine the value of the diagnostic testing; evaluate the interventions at the individual institutions, and to understand the impact on students and staff of such an approach.

The cluster will seek to develop a compartmentalised tool kit that enables other universities and colleges to replicate and build on this work. This would see the partners create and offer:

- Consultation workshop (and/or) Intangibles workshop exploring cultural issues;
- Diagnostic tool and guidance on how to deploy it in different settings;
- Discussion papers on micro, meso, and macro level impact as described above;
- Dissemination webinars/QAA conference.

Curriculum redesign through block delivery of learning

The block delivery of learning has occurred across the sector in a variety of places (Sweden, Canada and the USA), but it has recently risen to prominence through the work of Victoria University in Australia. https://www.vu.edu.au/study-at-vu/why-choose-vu/vu-block-model
The leadership team at Victoria saw worrying student retention statistics and chose to address it at an institutional level through a new method of organising and delivering student learning. The initial success of the model has seen it expand from first year provision to all years as the University explores whether such an approach can also support other key activities around progression and employability.

> *'Unlike the traditional university model where you juggle multiple subjects at once over a semester, at VU, you get to focus on one unit (subject) at a time. You complete each unit over a four-week 'block'. You then receive your results and have a few days to recharge before starting the next block.'*

It is proposed that from September 2021 the University delivers a suite of programmes within a block delivery framework. The focus is not the timetable, but the realignment of the programme and the modules to enable student success and community building[3] within the first year experience (Lizzio 2010).

The pilot may see the first year of participating programmes delivered in a 5 week blocks. Six blocks will be delivered within the academic calendar offering a blended approach that focuses on establishing sound foundations for student success. From a quality assurance perspective, it is not anticipated that this will require significant module changes, but this remains a possibility.

---

[3] https://emedia.rmit.edu.au/tito/content/student-lifecycle-model

As a result of the development programme teams will be encouraged to consider:
- Assessment that occurs within the block (diagnostics & patchwork?);
- New flexibility to provide early assessment wins for students in each module;
- Participants may also explore the value of programme level assessment as a component of preparation for student success – e.g. develop writing skills to bring all components together?
- Mentors: how might each participating programme deploy senior students to work with first year students?
- Student services could develop and integrate a student support package of learner developers, library, mentors and life coaches to support student progress and initiate early interventions.

The process will see the AbLE Academy to invite the following participants to a series of planning events:
- Programme team academic staff (up to 4 staff members)
- Students from the programme (at least 4 students)
- Director of Student and Academic Services (and/or nominee(s))
- Student Association representative(s)
- Head of Learner Development
- Head of Library
- Quality Assurance Manager
- One TQL to liaise with others

The initiative will be led by the Dean of Teaching and Learning who will draw upon AbLE Academy resources to support the process. In addition, Prof Trish McCluskey, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Learning and Teaching at Victoria University has agreed to act as an adviser and critical friend to the process.

The programme team will be expected to commit to a 12 month process that runs from planning to implementation and evaluation. They will also be encouraged to join AbLE colleagues and mentor others that follow their path as the learning is shared.

New approaches to orientation and the 'relentless welcome[4]'

Abertay lacks an integrated approach to its welcome process for students. The fact that due to articulation arrangements this welcome needs to be spread across different yearly entry points from year one to year four provides an interesting challenge. In January 2021, the AbLE Academy will draw together institutional and Student Association participants to map out what an integrated and embedded orientation and welcome process would look like.

The process will see AbLE invite the following participants to a series of planning events:
- Director of Student and Academic Services (and/or nominee(s))
- Student Association representative(s)
- External and Corporate Relations
- Head of Learner Development
- A student success adviser
- Head of Library
- Accommodation services
- One TQL to liaise with others

---

[4] https://www.teaching-matters-blog.ed.ac.uk/creating-a-relentless-welcome/

- AbLE Student consultant (first year)
- Programme leaders

The development team will review existing practices, learn from sectoral good practice and determine the value of a 'just in time' orientation approach spread throughout the student journey versus the standard 'up front' model. In addition, the development team will consider other elements of the enhancement theme so that it might be supported by, or offer support to, diagnostic testing, mentoring, block delivery of learning and microcredits.

Student Life Coaches

Abertay University believes in the students it welcomes onto its courses and recognises its responsibility to help those students to succeed. The proposal will harness existing data analytics processes to implement targeted interventions through a Student Life Coach to support students in danger of withdrawing.

If students embrace this new opportunity they will commit to and sign a learning contract with the university which will require them to engage with designated activities. The students' engagement will be monitored through the Student Life Coach who will offer guidance in the area of academic preparation, but will also liaise with wellbeing, finance, accommodation and any other university services that will enable that student to succeed.

This personalisation of the student journey could see the Student Life Coach provide a focal point and a constant for students as they seek to navigate through the world of academia. The coach will encourage the student to engage with specific activities and diagnostic tools to enable the student's participation, continuation and development. Through building of student confidence we will enable the student to stay with us and complete their degree.

The Student Life Coach is likely to provide:

Activity	Impact
Induction for repeating students	Coaches connect repeating students with fellow students in a non-threatening, confidence building environment
Regular meetings (up to 3 per term)	Assists with motivation, development of skills, identifying barriers, setting goals, planning time.
Deliver workshops	Skills development and connecting with other students to share experiences, success and understanding
Regular check-ins	Sense checking - quick checks on progress, reminders about the provision
Connection with courses and Student Academic Adviser	Coaches to regularly update key contacts within Schools and Professional Services
Signposting to specific support around the University	Connecting students with Wellbeing, Disability, Finance, Library, Careers, Student Assoc etc.

Engaging microcredits to develop successful student attributes

The Dean of Teaching and Learning will lead a development group that will develop and define the framework that will support microcredential development both within and outside of the curriculum. It will place an emphasis on students utilising the framework to personalise their own development journey as they prepare themselves for their future careers.

A development team will be created that will draw upon expertise from across the academic, student and professional service spheres. This will see initial proposals, phase 1, be prepared for February 2021 leading to implementation of the integrated framework, phase 2, for summer 2021.

The development will consider the substantial menu of existing extra-curricular provision (Principal's award, Graduate Awards Plus, Career Mentoring and Volunteering offers) and seek to embed them in an accessible and inviting framework for students that enables them to identify and tailor their own personal and professional development journey. The extra and co-curricular skills provision will also integrate and align to the Abertay HEAR (Higher Education Achievement Report).

A proposed framework will be created for February 2021 that will enable staff to design the new microcredentials for September 2021. The development group will undertake two phases of work:

- *Phase 1* will focus on the development of microcredentials as self-standing awards within the university's curriculum;
- *Phase 2* will deliver the wider personal and professional development framework that will embed the microcredentials within a menu of wider activities.

The initial components of the framework will comprise three areas: Transition and engagement; Microcredentials and Extra-Curricular activities.
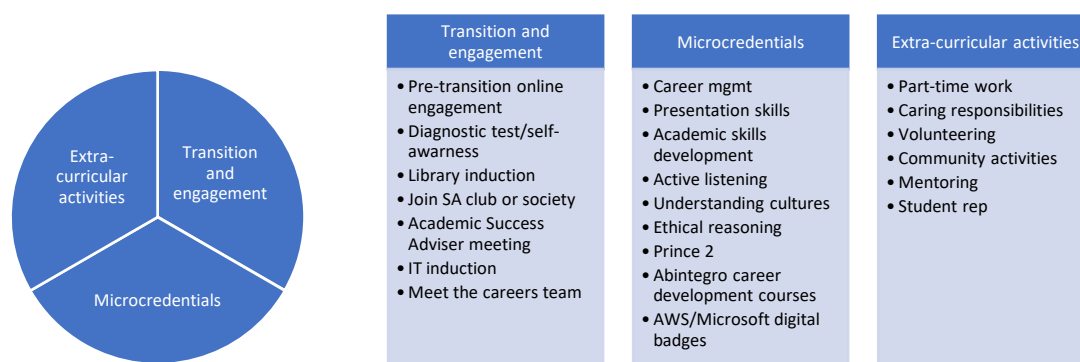

Transition and engagement	Microcredentials	Extra-curricular activities
• Pre-transition online engagement • Diagnostic test/self-awarness • Library induction • Join SA club or society • Academic Success Adviser meeting • IT induction • Meet the careers team	• Career mgmt • Presentation skills • Academic skills development • Active listening • Understanding cultures • Ethical reasoning • Prince 2 • Abintegro career development courses • AWS/Microsoft digital badges	• Part-time work • Caring responsibilities • Volunteering • Community activities • Mentoring • Student rep

Figure 2: Proposed award components

Transition
The key with transition is to show students that they can succeed and that they can make friends/connections. Through recognising engaging behaviours the institution starts to set expectations for students joining the community. This may be linked to the microcredential component.

Microcredentials
The new award bearing offer of microcredentials will be co-created. Initially it is likely that staff will generate ideas around what discipline specific and skills subjects can be created in this space. However, once in place and the full diversity of the online offer is considered it is anticipated that students may start to identify courses on such sites as

Abintegro or LinkedIn Learning that could be accredited. This will require flexibility of provision and the ability to partner students and staff in such developments.

Extra-curricular activities

'Work is a fundamental part of life for many undergraduate students. Institutions that do not recognise this shift are *failing to recognise that higher education is generally not the primary life environment of working students' (Perna 2010,i)*[5]

Not only are work or caring responsibilities a fundamental part of a student's life, but they also provide great learning opportunities for those students. Through a structured reflection process (such as the STAR technique) students can articulate their learning and receive recognition in the award. In addition, community activities such as volunteering, mentoring or student rep work at the University can be recognised which may, on occasion, help incentivise participation.

Mentoring as an integrated retention approach**.**

This is the most embryonic idea that will be pursued through the enhancement theme. It is the evolution of an embedded mentoring ecosystem that runs throughout all retention components. The drive is to utilise mentoring as the integrated backbone of the retention activities highlighted in this report. This may see:

- Mentoring as a key focus in the first year experience (block delivery) and alignment with the enablement agenda (mental health, disability, commuters)
- Mentoring training (blended approach) for all students and staff that address academic and pastoral support for students;
- Recognition and credit (curricula and extra-curricular) for participation (microcredits);
- The creation of a mentoring matrix to enable students to receive support whenever and wherever they need it within and outwith the University

 This aspirational work may begin in year one, but it is hoped come to the fore by year three.

Dissemination of work
How will you promote and communicate your work internally and externally?

The University will:

- Deliver webinar(s) through the QAA Collaborative Cluster work;
- Publish articles on its activities through journals and chapters;
- Encourage participants across the university to present at conferences as a staff development piece.

The University also plans to target the European First Year Experience conference, ensure staff and students participate and present at it and then host it sometime between 2022 and 2024.

---

[5] Perna, (2010) Understanding the Working College Student

There is also the challenge of how we make internal staff aware of this work. Obviously those who are involved in the projects will know about it but others may not. In addition, the integrated nature of the activities needs to be explained. The AbLE Academy will create a dedicated intranet page and a communications strategy e.g. regular updates, items in the University internal comms bulletins, blogs, updates to Student Rep Council, Committees and Divisional meetings.

Collaborative cluster work

What is your intended involvement in formal collaborative cluster work? Do you intend leading a cluster? Who might be involved in cluster activity?

(Formal bids for collaborative cluster work will be managed separately.)

Yes, already leading one Personalised Approaches to Resilience and Community (PARC).

Also participating in Microcredentials, Programme Leadership and Decolonising Curriculum cluster activities.

If interest (internal and external) in one of the activities mentioned in the overview of first year activities grows we might build that into a new cluster project bid.

Supporting staff and student engagement

How will you support your community to deliver on planned activities?

Students and staff will co-design all the activities mentioned in the proposal. If training needs are identified the AbLE Academy will be tasked with that role.

It is anticipated that the development leads will put out calls for participation through Deans. However, some participants will probably be selected because of their knowledge and expertise.

Evaluation

How will you monitor progress and impact of the enhancement activities?

Monitoring and evaluation will be key components of all the activities. The majority of activities will be run by a steering group who will ensure evaluation is at the heart of activities. The University's Teaching and Learning Committee will receive regular reports on progress. We also anticipate that QAA Scotland will at some point offer guidance on

evaluation and we will follow any evaluation methodologies suggested by QAA as appropriate.

Plan author:	Dr Luke Millard, Dean of Teaching and Learning
Date:	4.12.20

Return to: mailto:ARCadmin@qaa.ac.uk

Resilient Learning Communities

Institutional Plan for: <Name of Institution>

Financial Annex Year 1

Please provide information on how the funding given through the Enhancement Theme institutional contract will be used to support work within the HEI in relation to the Theme. This should be high level, not detailed.

At the time of the end-of-year report, you will be asked to comment on expenditure against financial plan information.

Please note that this information remains confidential and will not be made available on the web.

It is anticipated that the majority of funding will be utilised to pay for student engagement. AbLE Academy will employ student consultants to participate in and support the project work. In addition, some students in programme co-design or mentoring roles will be targeted with funding.

Plan author:	Dr Luke Millard, Dean of Teaching and Learning
Date:	4.12.20

Return to: mailto:ARCadmin@qaa.ac.uk