Resilient Learning Communities

Institutional Plan for: Robert Gordon 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.

Context

The newly launched Enhancement Theme, 'Resilient Learning Communities', strongly resonates with Robert Gordon University's strategic ambitions and aspirations in learning and teaching. RGU's Strategy Map (2018) outlines the university's commitment to ensuring a high-quality student experience, which will be achieved by adopting 'a student-centred approach to curriculum design and delivery' and providing 'appropriate support to enable students to be resilient, succeed in their studies and grow as individuals'.

To support the realisation of these ambitions, RGU launched its new Learning and Teaching Framework (RGU LTF) in early 2020. The RGU LTF was developed collaboratively by RGU's learning and teaching community and sought to respond to the changes being brought about by the fourth industrial revolution and evolution of the professions. The Framework articulates RGU's distinctive approach to learning and teaching and seeks to provide a template for producing adaptable and skilled graduates equipped for the opportunities and challenges of their future careers. RGU's engagement with the new Theme therefore provides a valuable opportunity to drive further progress against the university's strategic objectives and the ambitions outlined in the RGU LTF.

RGU also welcomes the opportunity to explore the changing needs and values of our student community through this Theme. With around 16,000 learners studying at the university, RGU's student population is highly diverse thanks to the university's strengths in on- and off-campus provision, commitment to widening access, extensive articulation routes, and vibrant international student community. Recent developments such as the introduction of Graduate Apprenticeships have further diversified RGU's student body, and this is likely to continue in light of the university's strategic aim to further expand the range and diversity of its provision to support individual's professional development throughout their careers.

RGU also recognises the timeliness and relevance of this Theme for the university and wider sector in terms of supporting our ongoing response to, and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. As has been the case across the sector, COVID has had profound and wide-reaching impacts on the university's student and staff communities, learning and teaching and wider operations. Student evaluation indicates the success of RGU's response so far, with the university maintaining high levels of overall satisfaction in NSS 2020, as well as the internal 2020/21 Semester 1 Student Experience Questionnaire.

This success has been underpinned by rapid, widespread enhancement and we value this Theme as an opportunity to reflect on the positive enhancements that have arisen in response to the pandemic, and how they will impact our approach to learning, teaching and the student experience post-COVID. While RGU's overall response has been highly effective, student feedback has also highlighted some areas for development that we are keen to enhance further. These align closely with the current Theme, centring around support for student wellbeing and sense of learning community.

Having strengthened institutional expertise and capability in regards to supporting student transitions and evidence-based enhancement, RGU's active engagement in the previous two Themes has, and will continue to benefit the university's response to COVID and the wider enhancement activity that will be driven under the auspices of the new Theme.

It is anticipated that the preliminary plan outlined below will evolve over the course of RGU's engagement with the Theme, being shaped according to institutional priorities and through engagement with students, staff and the wider sector.

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	Prof Elizabeth Hancock, Vice Principal Academic Development and Student Experience		
TLG staff representative	Dr Rachel McGregor, Academic Support Lead		
TLG student representative	Emmanuel Akerele, President (Education and Welfare)		
TLG staff alternate	Lead Teaching Excellence Fellow (appointment tbc early January)		
An RGU Enhancement Theme Leadership Group (RGU:ETLG) will be established as an early action, with staff and student membership reflecting the agreed activity in Year 1. This membership will be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure alignment with planned activity and maximise opportunities for engagement.			

Planned activity: Year 1

Key priorities

Throughout our engagement with the Theme, RGU's key priorities will be:

- Further realising the university's strategic ambition to ensure a high-quality student experience;
- Supporting the implementation of the new RGU Learning and Teaching Framework (RGU LTF) to achieve its aspirations in preparing graduates for the future evolution of the professions;
- Further enacting RGU's strategic commitment to our staff, recognising the crucial role colleagues play in enabling a high-quality student experience;
- Supporting the university, our staff, students and the wider sector in our ongoing response to, and recovery from the pandemic.

Outcomes

The outcomes that the university wishes to achieve through our engagement with the Theme include:

- Further progress against the following strategic objectives:
  - Adopting a student-centred approach to curriculum design and delivery;
  - Providing appropriate support to enable students to be resilient, succeed in their studies and grow as individuals;
  - Fostering a culture of staff engagement, empowerment, community and wellbeing.

- Further embedding of the RGU LTF across the university's provision in flexible ways that suit the diverse needs of our learning communities and enhance the student experience;

- The university, wider sector and all those within our learning communities emerge stronger from the pandemic by embracing change, recognising and solidifying positive achievements and enhancements.

Activities

To support the achievement of these outcomes, Theme activity will be driven across different levels of the organisation, including:

- Institutional level – university-wide projects driving enhancement to the student learning experience across RGU;

- Discipline/service level – more localised projects enabling enhancement in the context of a specific subject or professional service area.

At all levels, activity will be informed by the following principles:

- Strategic relevance – activity is aligned with the university's strategic objectives and aspirations in learning, teaching and the student experience;
- Student partnership – activity is informed by the student voice and achieved through collaboration and co-creation with learners;
- Evidence-based enhancement – activity is guided by relevant data insights, capitalising on the university's strengths in this area and the outcomes of the previous Theme;
- Engaging and empowering colleagues – activity is informed by staff consultation, promotes the participation of colleagues, and enables colleagues to enhance the student and staff experience.

Active participation in collaborative and sector-wide activity will also be central to RGU's approach and used as a further opportunity to engage students, staff and other stakeholders with the Theme.

Benefits at sector and institutional level

Anticipated benefits at sector and institutional level include:

- Opportunities for reflection, sense making and forward planning following a period of immense change;
- Recognition and celebration of areas of strength and positive enhancement;
- Deeper insight into opportunities for future development;
- Greater connectedness and collaboration between students, staff, disciplines, and institutions;
- Enhanced student and staff engagement, belonging and wellbeing;
- Greater strategic alignment, purpose and ownership;
- Greater resilience within and across learning communities at all levels;
- Further development of a working, learning and social atmosphere which is inclusive, harmonious and respectful of diversity.

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?

In addition to the key priorities outlined the previous section, a specific focus in Year 1 will be launching the new Theme at RGU and establishing the necessary infrastructure to support its work over the next three years.

Key activities will include:

- Introducing the Theme to RGU staff, students and other relevant stakeholders;
- Gathering input from these groups to shape the work of the Theme moving forwards;
- Establishing the RGU Enhancement Theme Leadership Group (RGU:ETLG) and defining how it will operate over the duration of the Theme;
- Participating in the Theme Leadership Group and collaborative clusters to inform RGU's engagement with the Theme and support the work of the wider sector;
- Building and enhancing internal networks to facilitate sharing of insights and ensure sustained engagement of a broad spectrum of staff in the Theme.

In support of the key priorities and overarching outcomes identified above, institutional activity will focus on the following strands:

Evolving RGU's approach to online learning post-COVID

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a seismic impact on the higher education sector. Like other HEIs, RGU has had to radically transform its approach to learning, teaching, assessment and student support, and to innovate in order to safeguard the student experience. While this transformation has been driven by circumstances outside of the university's control, the need to innovate has led to many positive enhancements and accelerated progress in respect of the university's ambitions with regards to borderless education. To fully capitalise on this, it will be essential for the university to take stock of these developments and consider the future direction for online learning at RGU.

This project strand will support the university in further evolving and establishing its approach to online learning by:

- Creating opportunities for reflection and practice sharing around online learning, teaching, assessment and student support throughout the pandemic;
- Identifying and consolidating enhancements that have benefitted students' learning experiences and the experiences of RGU colleagues;
- Determining opportunities for further development through the analysis of relevant data and dialogue with students and colleagues;
- Reviewing and further developing RGU's digital estate and online learning infrastructure.

Supporting whole person education throughout the learner journey

The RGU LTF sets out the university's aspiration to deliver a whole person education in order to meet the needs of the future workplace. COVID-19 has driven further focus on the personal and social dimensions of learning as the institution has sought to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on our learning communities and student wellbeing. This has resulted in increased collaboration across academic areas, professional support services and RGU:Union to provide integrated, holistic support for students at key moments of transition, e.g. welcome. Student evaluation has confirmed the effectiveness of this approach but also indicated that there is scope to increase students' awareness of and engagement with support, particularly around wellbeing, as well as to develop students' personal resilience.

This project strand will further embed integrated support for whole person learning throughout learners' journeys at RGU by:

- Bringing professional support services, academic areas and students together to conceptualise support for whole person education;
- Enhancing support at key moments of transition, drawing on insights from the 2014-17 Enhancement Theme;
- Identifying further opportunities for collaboration across curriculum and service areas in order to provide an integrated support offer and build students' resilience;
- Reviewing and enhancing student communications and awareness of available support at the university.

Promoting retention and success through inclusive practice

RGU has a long track record in widening access and supporting diverse learners to achieve their potential regardless of their backgrounds. The RGU LTF affirms this commitment, identifying flexibility and inclusion as one of the key pillars of RGU's educational approach. Yet, changing student demographics, new legislative requirements, and the more immediate impacts brought about by COVID mean that the university must continue to appraise and enhance the inclusivity of its learning and teaching. While institutional metrics show much to be proud of in this space, equality monitoring has also highlighted disparities in retention, satisfaction and attainment correlated with certain characteristics, for example, gender and declared disability.

This project strand will further promote inclusive curriculum design and delivery at the university in order to enhance student retention and success by:

- Developing staff awareness of, and skills in inclusive curriculum design and delivery, including the accessibility of digital learning in accordance with Public Sector Bodies Accessibility Regulations.
- Interrogating institutional data and working in partnership with students and staff to identify opportunities for impactful enhancement;
- Planning and implementing targeted enhancements to promote parity of participation in priority areas.

Supporting RGU's Course Leader Community

RGU recognises the pivotal contribution of our Course Leaders with regard to the student learning experience, and this underpins the specification and incentivisation of the role at the university. Both NSS and internal evaluation data consistently highlight the primacy of the course in students' overall learning experiences. This has remained true throughout the pandemic, with student feedback highlighting strengths and opportunities for enhancement within the course experience. Course Leaders therefore have a critical role to play in developing student resilience and resilient learning communities. For this reason, along with the multifaceted, sometimes challenging nature of the role, the resilience of Course Leaders themselves is also paramount.

Expanding work undertaken as part of the last Theme, this project will a) support Course Leaders in building student resilience and resilient learning communities and b) build the resilience of RGU's Course Leader community by:

- Supporting Course Leaders in the ongoing response to COVID and the implementation of the RGU LTF at course level;

- Facilitating opportunities for RGU Course Leaders to come together as a community that enrich their work and support enhancement of the student experience.

In addition to these institutional work strands, the RGU:ETLG will identify short-term project initiatives within discipline and service areas, to be supported by the Enhancement Theme funding.

It is expected that the benefits derived through our work in Year 1 will align with the overall benefits outlined above and include:

- Additional clarity and confidence around RGU's future direction;
- Students and staff feeling recognised, valued and empowered;
- Increased partnership among students, staff, academic and professional support areas;
- Wider understanding, ownership and implementation of the RGU LTF;
- Furthering embedding of RGU's core values of equality, inclusion and respect.

Dissemination of work

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

The university's work on this theme will be promoted and communicated internally and externally in a variety of ways:

- The RGU:ETLG will play a key role by defining and implementing a communications strategy and members acting as champions for the Theme;

- The RGU Committee structure will be utilised to raise awareness of the Theme's work across the university and formally report on its activities;

- Regular briefings will be held open to all colleagues to update on progress and highlight opportunities for engagement;

- Staff development and networking opportunities will be used to showcase and advance the work of the Theme, including established offerings such as RGU's annual Learning and Teaching Conference and TeachMeet series, as well as bespoke events;

- Communication with RGU's student body will be facilitated by RGU:Union;

- External communication will be supported by participation in sector-wide activity and collaborative clusters, along with contributing to Enhancement Theme Conferences.

RGU appreciates the value of working collaboratively with other institutions on areas of mutual interest and welcomes the opportunity to participate in collaborative clusters over the course of this Theme.

Given the planned focus on Course Leaders in Year 1, the university is particularly keen to engage in the cluster exploring 'Programme leadership: strengthening resilience, supporting learning communities'.

RGU has also been invited to participate in the cluster around Micro-credentials, a topic which is of strategic importance to the university and aligns with the institutional objective to develop the range and diversity of our provision to support individuals' professional development.

Other areas of particular interest include:
- Student mental wellbeing
- Personalised approaches to learning and community

While RGU is not currently in a position to lead a collaborative cluster, the university is keen to do so in subsequent years and active consideration will be given to this in Year 1.

Staff and student engagement with the Theme will be supported in a range of ways:

- The RGU ELT will be reconstituted each year, allowing opportunities for a variety of staff and students to lead the work of Theme;

- Opportunities will be facilitated for all colleagues to influence the work of the Theme; for instance, staff views on potential areas of focus and the operation of the Theme were surveyed to inform initial planning.

- Engagement and ownership will be generated at a discipline/service level through the commissioning of local projects and participation in institutional work strands;

- Student partnership will be a core feature of all project activity associated with the Theme;

- It is anticipated that project activity will result in relevant 'outputs' which can be shared with wider audiences as relevant;

- The range of mechanisms outlined in the 'Dissemination' section above will further promote staff and student engagement.

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

An overarching evaluation of the work of the Theme will be carried out on an annual basis. This will be informed by project-level evaluation at the relevant point in each project plan.

Appropriate measures of success and evaluation mechanisms will be defined on a project-by-project basis, and projects will be appraised against their intended aims and objectives. As appropriate, consideration will be given to:

- Relevant qualitative and quantitative measures;
- Different kinds and levels of impact;
- Short-terms benefits and where possible, ongoing impact;
- Stakeholder views;
- Successes and opportunities for further development;
- Unintended and/or more intangible outcomes.

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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.

Planned expense	Budgeted cost
Student engagement activity	£1500
Small grant awards	£2000
Staff development activity	£1000
Dissemination events	£500
Project management contribution	£1000
TOTAL	**£6000**

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