# Resilient Learning Communities

## Institutional Plan for: Abertay University

This document will form your year 3 plan and should be around three to four sides of A4. You can find your year 1 plan through this [web page](#).

| Context |
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| 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. Any context statement could draw on salient points from the previous year's learning/outcomes from Theme work and reflect any changes in the strategic direction of your institution. |

Abertay had the pleasure of a very successful ELIR visit in December 2021 and the outcomes of that experience have helped to strengthen our enhancement led approach.  It highlighted our ongoing work to address issues around retention and will embolden us to move forward to continue that improvement and address other issues of value to the university and sector.

The commendations were in the areas of:
- Embedding opportunities for student partnership in enhancement
- Inclusive and accessible learning environment for all
- Engagement with employers
- Staff development and support

The areas for action in the form of recommendations were:
- Effective implementation of University strategies – staff understanding
- Student retention
- Feedback on assessment
- Review of professional services
- Adjustment of student marks

Work has already begun to address all of these recommendations with groups developing responses and action plans.

The Enhancement Theme continues to be embraced at Abertay and the raising in profile of retention as an area of concern has been addressed throughout the institution and to Court which is monitoring our performance in this area.

The first-year of microcredentials has been delivered to all first year students and we are now seeking to learn, evolve and adapt. Initial results are very positive in terms of progression, but the longer term impact of building successful academic and social foundations for students is going to be key.

The success of the QAA PARC collaborative cluster initiative has also helped colleagues realise that there is international interest in diagnostic approaches and how that can be embedded into curriculum through microcredentials.

The three Student Success Officers have also delivered their first year of work and this has been successful in supporting retention activities. Learning is now being reviewed with key stakeholders across the university to see how we might increase the impact of the role across the university as we seek to ensure we create that sense of learning community at Abertay.

One highlighted activity in the initial plan, the block delivery of learning, is not being pursued at this point, but it remains under consideration. We conducted significant development work in this space, but recognised that it was not for Abertay at this point in time.

| **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. | |
| Institutional lead | Luke Millard |
| TLG staff representative | Julie Blackwell Young |
| TLG student representative | Olivia Robertson, President of Students' Association |
| Add additional rows for additional members | |

| **Overall outcomes/activity** |
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| Are there any changes to your key priorities, outcomes and delivery activities that you identified at the start of the Theme? |

The year two plan identified that the key activities would focus upon:

- 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.

The majority of these work streams are on track or about to be actioned if they were not promised in year one. The only activity that has significantly changed is the Student Life Coaching which has been adapted to focus upon retention developments through the employment of recent graduates as Student Success Officers. There will be more information on that role later in this submission.

At this point of time we have also decided not to pursue the Curriculum redesign through block delivery of learning. The development group has ceased meeting after a proposal was discussed at the University's Academic Leadership Group and Teaching & Learning Committee. This set out the parameters for an Abertay instance that could be piloted across a range of programmes. The paper has sought to draw on the literature on the subject and then scrutinise the potential development through a series of lenses:

- Lens 1: Design principles for curriculum and assessment
- Lens 2: Design principles for student engagement and success
- Lens 3: Design principles for staff engagement and success

It was not felt that this was the appropriate time to consider this development. Staff and students had experienced great change through the pandemic and needed to better understand the new learning approaches arising out of that.

## Year 3 outcomes/activity

In answering the following, identify what is continuing from year 1 and what is new:
What are your key priorities?
What outcomes do you want to achieve?
What activities will you deliver to achieve your key priorities?

### Diagnostic Testing of Students

Abertay remains the lead partner on the QAA Collaborative Cluster project Personalised Approaches to Resilience and Community (PARC) which had a very successful first year and has now been funded by QAA to continue and expand its activities in a second year.

At Abertay, the formative diagnostic test has been embedded in ABE 101, a first year microcredential that students take as they transition into the university, post enrolment. This effective deployment of the diagnostic and the wider microcredentials is crucial to the university and will be fully evaluated through quantitative and qualitative sources. The target is to improve our first-year retention rate through this approach.

### New approaches to orientation and the 'relentless welcome[1]'

The University is starting to take more of an integrated approach to orientation, but we recognise that we still have some way to go on this work. The creation of the microcredentials that are deployed on enrolment will support this work, but we need to see how this grows and develops from first years to direct entrants at year 2 or 3. The ethos or 'relentless welcome' is starting to be recognised but it is yet to be embraced across all

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

programmes.  A new microcredential for direct entrants into year 2 will be employed in September 2022 and will be thoroughly evaluated as we seek to understand how we can better support the transition and set the right expectations for those students.  An additional, extra curricular, confidence building programme for year 3 direct entrants is also being deployed with an external provider, GRIT, and we look to learn from that deployment and impact.

In addition, the University has begun to work to initiate a 'summer camp' approach for students who would like to access the university and may be short on qualifications.  This will be in place for summer 2023.

A new integrated approach to freshers and institutional welcome through programmes has also been identified as desirable and a working group will be developing that in 2022/23 for implementation in Sept 23.


**Student Success Officers (SSO)**

Abertay University believes in the students it welcomes onto its courses and recognises its responsibility to help those students to succeed.   The SSOs, who are recent graduates from the schools in which they work, harness existing data analytics processes to implement targeted interventions and provide a personalised approach to support and development.  This personalisation of the student journey sees the SSO provide a focal point and a constant for students as they seek to navigate through the university. The SSOs 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 enable the student to visualise success and complete their degree.

The University attracted funding for these 3 posts from the Northwood Charitable Trust Foundation. Funding is for 3 years and the Dean of Teaching and Learning will need to report regularly to the Trust on progress and impact.  Three graduates from 2021 were identified to lead this work, one in each School, and the first year is now complete.

Evaluation is being undertaken of impact, through analysis of examination board data and consultations with students and staff, and the existing SSOs will remain for the second year so they can build on their learning and establish the role.


**Engaging microcredentials to develop successful student attributes**

The University introduced the Microcredential initiative in September 2021 and is now evaluating that impact through progression data and student/staff feedback.
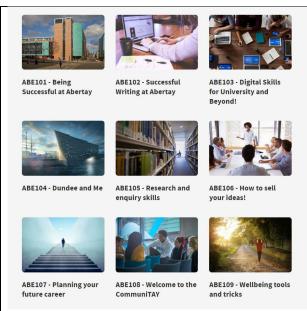
Diagram 1: Year one Microcredential structure

The students' journey through the Microcredentials see them all undertake the mandatory Abertay 101 component that includes a diagnostic test that informs students of their strengths and weakness across a range of areas. The five pillars of the diagnostic test are academic skills, numeracy, digital skills, employability and wellbeing.

Outcomes of the diagnostic enable the student to undertake some reflection of their skills base and help them select the three remaining microcredits from the pool of options. The Microcredentials are a genuinely university wide effort with modules being delivered by the Students' Association, Professional Services, Education Development and Academic Schools.

There is one simple target and that is to improve retention of our first-year students through helping them to academically and socially integrate into their new university.

**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 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 has not yet gained the integrated institutional focus that we espoused. We remain committed and some new and perhaps scalable activity is being explored through the use of technologies (Vygo) to support this work.

**EnABLE Learning and Teaching Projects**

In June 2022 a call for projects was released to support the enhancement theme.  Seven co-creation projects have been identified:

- Comfortable in my skin: Examining the impact of using avatar skins in the virtual classroom on student satisfaction, engagement, and sense of community.
- Walking, talking, and the blended campus: Exploring the potential of informal walking groups for enhancing the learning community
- Developing Problem Solving Logic++
- Articulation and enabling direct entrant student success
- Securing a Digital Campus with Students as Partners
- Enhancing & Enabling Student Carer Experience & Retention
- Levelling the Playing Field: Supporting Student Success in Mathematics for Games

These projects will run for a year and all embrace the students as partners approach with students and staff working together to co-design and deliver activities.

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**Evaluation**

How do you intend to evaluate your year 3 projects and activities?

Prior to completing this section, it would be useful to refer to the QAAS website resource: A Guide to Basic Evaluation in HE (specifically, Section 8, Summary overview on page 23, and the Evaluation Checklist – Appendix A, on pages 28-29).

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| Title of project/activity |
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| Evaluation is key |

| What change is being made? (Brief description(s) of overall activity/intervention) |
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| We are continuing to collate institutional data around student success and now that the first year of the integrated work of microcredentials and Student Success Officers has been delivered, we are acutely aware of the need to evaluate at a quantitative and qualitative level.<br><br>This is necessary to improve the quality of that offer but also to showcase internally and externally.  For example, the SSOs are funded by an independent charity who want to understand the impact of their investment. |

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**Dissemination of work**

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

We have internal seminars already arranged for some of the topics, Microcredentials, and SSOs, and also sectoral dissemination for diagnostic testing through Quality Support Network and QAA Annual Conference.

We are also holding an internal staff conference in 2022/23 to disseminate work.

In June 2023 we will host the European First Year Experience Conference (EFYE) and will disseminate our work to a global audience. The Dean of Teaching and Learning is also promoting the work when asked to deliver keynotes at conferences. The latest of those in July 2022 was at the Universidade do Minho in Portugal where he spoke of the QAA PARC project and the microcredential work.

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**Supporting staff and student engagement**

How will you support your community to engage with planned activities?

We will be employing students to help us promote some of these activities and monitor the impact. Students are also on the Enhancement Theme steering group and we had a significant discussion at the last meeting as to how we can grow this student engagement.

Students are directly employed to deliver the EnABLE projects.

Staff will engage through pilot activities, seminars we hold and through learning and teaching project funding we will share.

The EFYE conference in June 2023 is to delivered in partnership with SPARQs to ensure student union engagement and a focus on integrated approaches to student success.

| **Plan author:** | Luke Millard |
|---|---|
| **Date:** | 9.9.22 |

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