



Scottish First Year Experience Network

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ABSTRACT

The Scottish First Year Experience Network (SFYEN) is a collaborative effort drawn from across the Scottish higher education sector that focuses on enhancing the transition, engagement, and outcomes of first-year students. Established during the European First Year Experience (EFYE) Conference (2023), this network has initiated three Targeted Activity Groups (TAGs) which focus on practices that address the challenges and opportunities of working with particular student groups. This paper sets out the vision, theory of change and initial outputs of the network, since its inception, and considers the future direction of the network within the new Tertiary landscape.

Keywords: First Year Experience, transitions, student success, network, integrated practice

Background & Information

The Scottish First Year Experience Network (SFYEN) is a collaborative network aimed at enhancing the transition, engagement and outcomes of students entering their first year of higher education at a university in Scotland. The term first year is defined broadly and considers the point a student enters their first year at a Scottish university and therefore is inclusive acknowledging the various routes that exist across the sector that can see students enter in years 2, 3 or 4. The network aims to achieve this by taking an integrated practitioner approach (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022) with academics, professional service colleagues, student organisations and students all engaged in thematic work to improve the student experience. The network recognises the critical importance of a positive first year experience in shaping transitions and therefore enhancing student success (Lizzio, 2006).

The Scottish First Year Experience Network (SFYEN) was created following the European First Year Experience (EFYE) Conference 2023 hosted by Abertay University. During the keynote titled 'Daring to be Different or should it be Caring to be Different?' (McIntosh & Millard, 2023) a call to action for the Scottish sector was raised. This interactive and challenging keynote discussed the diversity of students and their needs whilst considering the importance of students as partners, student engagement and a sense of community and belonging that need to be in place to enable student success post-Pandemic.

McIntosh and Millard (2023) discussed early intervention and transitional support (McIntosh & Barden, 2019) as a key feature of enabling student success. This included taking a students as partners approach

(Bovill et al., 2015; Healey et al., 2014) in the first-year experience to facilitate student engagement and belonging (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Thomas, 2012; Nygaard et al., 2013) by taking a student-focused approach (Felten et al., 2016; Felten & Lambert, 2020). Central to this approach was the acknowledgment that to deliver this vision an integrated approach between academics and professional services was required, to facilitate thematic working (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022). The keynote concluded with a call across Scotland for the formation of the Scottish First Year Experience Network. It is the ambition of the authors to report more extensively upon the methods of working and outputs of the network in a future, lengthier article.

Vision

The primary aim of the network is to work collaboratively to share experiences and initiatives that promote a positive and supportive first-year experience across Scotland. The network aims to share and debate innovative pedagogical approaches, student-centered programmes, and a holistic perspective through the following issues:

- Student Transitions focused upon fostering a sense of belonging and ensuring the successful start of the students' academic journey.
- Student Life considers students with differing characteristics from commuting students to international students.
- Student Wellbeing focuses on building supportive environments that meet both physical and mental health and wellbeing needs.

From these aims we have developed a theory of change to conceptualise the eventual outcomes and impacts of this work. Following the model outlined by TASO (2023) we identified the following short term and medium-term outcomes:

- Short term. Formation of working collaborations across the Scottish college and university sector with some agreed terminology and sharing of practice to enhance the student experience at individual institutions.
- Medium term. Closer working relationships between different sectors that feed into higher education and between different higher education providers (e.g. colleges and universities). Evidence of positive impact on the student experience of their first year e.g. increased confidence, retention, progression, well-being and belonging.

It was felt that longer-term outcomes should be determined from the collective work of the group, and this will form some of the future conversations mentioned later. It is anticipated that through the collective work of the network and the evidence gathered the network will have the potential to impact policy locally and nationally.

We hope that the main impact of this work will be a more positive student experience with increased student wellbeing and potentially an increase in sector student retention and outcomes. Other impacts are improved attainment and progression, a reduction in attainment gaps between different groups of students with regards to attainment, progression and retention and finally closer working relationships across the Tertiary sector.

These outcomes and impacts are being developed, through an evolutionary approach, being shaped and implemented by the participants in the network as articulated in the next section.

Implementation

Inputs

Following the keynote at EFYE, all Scottish delegates were invited to an inaugural meeting which introduced the network and discussed priorities for the sector. Approximately 40 people attended and contributed to the discussions. Following a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2020), three priority areas emerged. These were:

- Mature Students who are over 21 years of age at the beginning of their undergraduate studies, or over 25 years of age at the beginning of their postgraduate studies.
- International Students who have left their country of origin and moved to Scotland for the purpose of studying at a Scottish University.
- Articulating Students who move into higher education with a Higher National Certificate (HNC) or Higher National Diploma (HND) gained at a college.

As the network has evolved and to support integrated practice and thematic working, Targeted Activity Groups (TAGs) have been formed to lead work on each of the priority areas. These groups focused on surfacing the challenges for each area and identifying opportunities for enhancement through sharing experiences. Each targeted activity group has a diverse membership. This diversity is illustrated by the range of roles within the network's membership with 60 members from across 13 higher education institutions in Scotland. An integrated practitioner approach (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022) to the first-year experience is important for the network as it enables a wide variety of perspectives, both academic and professional. The 65 members provide this diverse perspective with 19 academics (29%), 11 educational developers (17%), 29 professional services (45%) and 6 student association members (9%).

Activities

The mature students targeted activity group includes 21 members from 6 institutions. This group has initially considered the characteristics of a mature student with an emphasis on student identity. Members acknowledged that this is made more complicated through the intersectionality of many students' lives. This broadened the focus to consider mature students as commuter students and carers. The mature students' group is reviewing data across participating universities to understand the demographics of mature students.

The targeted activity group focusing on international students has discussed the priorities and challenges for international students. This included understanding international students' experiences, expectations and how they are recognised at sector level in national policies and frameworks. An emphasis for the international group was the consideration of students' social and cultural differences recognising the positive impact for universities. Several members of this group have presented lightning talks based on current practice and research within the sector. These lightning talks will be created into case studies to be shared as sector wide resources. This group includes 23 members of the network from 8 institutions.

The articulating students targeted activity group includes 31 members from across 9 institutions. The group's focus has considered the impact of Scotland's tertiary quality enhancement framework (TQEF) (SFC,

2024) and changes to qualifications such as the Next Gen HNCs (SQA, 2024). To identify the focus, the group has gathered insight from college partners on their challenges to ensure informed decisions about the direction of focus are made. This focus will consider areas such as the impact of new college qualifications for curriculum design at university and student support. The output will include a positioning paper with recommendations reviewing the macro, micro and meso impacts of this change.

Although each targeted activity group has taken a different approach to exploring the priority area for Scotland, each group is meeting every 6-8 weeks to ensure the conversations move forward. The groups will provide outputs for the sector through case studies, recommendations, and position papers. These resources will be made available to the Scottish sector through various publication routes.

Conclusion

Hosted at the University of the West of Scotland (UWS), the Scottish First Year Experience Network came together at a symposium on the 2nd of May 2024. This inaugural event was an opportunity to reflect on the first 6 months of the targeted activity groups¹. The symposium also considered the future direction and workstreams of the network to address the challenge of ensuring we continue to enhance student outcomes.

A key element of the discussion at the symposium was the development of the new Scottish Tertiary Enhancement Framework by the Quality Assurance Agency in Scotland. This is looking at the development of a harmonised quality review process for all colleges and universities. To align with that ambition, the meeting discussed how the Scottish college sector could be welcomed and integrated into SFYEN's future work. This would enable the network to consider the preparation of students for transition as well as the welcoming of students to university. Members agreed that this ambition would clearly align with the new tertiary approaches and would be an exciting development that our college partners could help lead. The task was now to recruit college partners and consider those wider challenges.

Biographies

Jack Hogan is a Lecturer in Academic Practice in the Abertay Learning Enhancement (AbLE) Academy. His pedagogic research interests are around the first-year student experience, transitions, retention, and employability. His current focus is around personalised learning, diagnostics and how microcredentials can be used to support student transitions.

Julie Blackwell Young is Head of Teaching Quality and Learning Enhancement in the Abertay Learning Enhancement (AbLE) Academy. She has worked at several universities in England and Scotland and in her current post has cross-institutional strategic roles in teaching excellence, curriculum design and development and supporting pedagogic research.

Emily McIntosh is Director of Student Success at the University of West of Scotland. Emily is a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (PFHEA) and a National Teaching Fellow (NTF). Emily is co-editor of the recently published monograph *The Impact of the Integrated Practitioner in Higher Education*.

Luke Millard is Professor of Student Development, Dean of Teaching and Learning and Head of the AbLE Academy at Abertay University in Scotland. He is a Principal Fellow of the UK's Higher Education Academy which recognised his work on improving the student experience through collaborative working with staff

and students in the areas of student engagement and co-creation, student employment, transitions and the first-year experience.

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