



## Editorial

### Vol 12, Issue 2 (2024)

Welcome to this special issue, which examines the new ‘tertiary’ approach to quality assurance and enhancement for colleges and universities in Scotland. We have taken a slightly different approach to this issue to allow us to fully explore this new development for the Scottish sector. In addition to our call for papers we invited contributions from students, experienced educational developers, the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland (QAAS), and colleagues based in European higher education. As a snapshot of a very particular time and moment in our post-school educational landscape, we see common themes emerging across all of these perspectives. There is a focus on transitions, and what that looks like across our diverse contexts as well as the unwavering commitment to enhancement. All of the initiatives examined and reflected on in our articles talk to the importance of belonging for our students, the need to let them know that – as a sector – we care about them, and we want them to succeed in their studies wherever that may be and in whatever forms that may take. Above all is a common thread from all of our authors of hope for the future.

We open with a scene setting piece from Kathryn O’Loan, formerly of the QAAS, and Debra Macfarlane from the QAAS who explain how we have arrived at our tertiary sector in Autumn 2024. They outline how the breadth and reach of the new tertiary approach across Scotland’s colleges and universities, operationalised through Scotland’s Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF) - will impact all stakeholders and its success will depend on their engagement with, and involvement in, the TQEF as a shared educational experience. They show how Scotland’s approach to education has a strong tradition of quality enhancement and emphasise that the TQEF aims to build on this through the implementation of:

a shared set of principles, delivery mechanisms and outputs that can be applied to the different contexts of our colleges and universities to give assurance on academic standards, the quality of the student experience and ensure accountability for public investment in learning and teaching (Scottish Funding Council, 2024).

The Scottish Funding Council’s (2024) vision for the TQEF is “a more coherent and streamlined tertiary education system from the student perspective” that will deliver “the best learning experience for students”, putting students and the student experience “at the heart” of this new approach. We continue on with six papers which look closely at that current student experience.

Rachel Horrocks Birss looks explicitly at the experience of articulating students, outlining what we can learn from a transitions’ initiative – STEP UP – at the University of Dundee, which supports college students in integrating into the university. What is clear from Horrocks Birss’ reflections is the need for continuity for those students so that the transition from college to university is smooth and in this example we see how focusing on assessment is a key aspect of a successful transition. From this case study, the important take

away message for our readers is that we cannot take a deficit approach to our articulating students but instead recognise the plurality and diversity of our learners' journeys. It is really helpful to have a concrete "blueprint", in the words of Horrocks Birss, to follow and see how this might look in practice.

We then move to the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) where Vic Boyd and Caroline Fleeting share with us a case study that reinforces again the central role assessment plays in our students' experience of their learning as well as how we can also build student belonging. Here, however, we learn of an institution-wide approach that embeds assessment within a personal and professional development framework – ASPIRE – whereby students can reflect on the broader experience of learning and being a student. In this way, the case study reinforces the notion of 'being, becoming, belonging' that is advocated by Horrocks Birss. Through embedding broader questions of what it means to be a student in their framework, the reflections here prompt us to think about not only what we're teaching in this emerging tertiary landscape but also the diversity of our disciplines and modalities, which offers a richness to our collective curricula, and the sheer depth and breadth of possibilities our institutions can offer students (and staff) when we explore our learning beyond those traditional boundaries.

Led by work at the University of Abertay and UWS, Jack Hogan and colleagues home in on a collaborative network exploring the first year experience, which is of course such a critical moment of transition for all of our students regardless of whether that first year is in fact Year 2, 3 or even 4. Based on the preferences of the network, they have decided to focus on the experience of three student populations: mature students (which they define as over 25); international students and articulating students. Drawing on literature, they highlight out the importance of creating a sense of belonging for all of our students and it will be interesting to see how their discussions and research leads to a greater collective understanding of how we can best support those particular groups of students. Their ambitions for the network going forward are on the inclusion of our college counterparts and it will be fascinating to see what learning comes from that collaboration to help us identify how we can best support the transition for all of our students in the tertiary sector in Scotland.

Megan Brown, of Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (sparqs) and Simon Varwell, now at the University of the Highlands and Islands and formerly of sparqs, offer us an insightful and comprehensive history of how the Student Learning Experience Model has come into being in Scotland, highlighting the central role sparqs has played, and will continue to play, in our tertiary sector in terms the conversations they enable between staff and students both within and across our institutions. We see this explicitly in the centrality of the model in our new Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework. As well as tracing what is unique about this Scottish model of student engagement and partnership, this article emphasises the depth and breadth of student participation in its creation which reinforces the collaborative nature of their work. What is also exciting is how sparqs have always worked across the tertiary sector in Scotland and to be beginning our tertiary journey with a student-led focus on enhancement such as this feels like a very strong foundation to work from.

Derek Roberston and Tom Cunningham build on their QAAS funded project which focused on the experience of students articulating from colleges into universities, and turn their attention to staff perspectives. Given the critical importance of staff engagement in a tertiary sector, this article is very timely and enables us to focus in on the key areas the staff perspectives draw our attention to when thinking of how we best support our articulating students. Interestingly, their findings echo those student perspectives, which suggests a shared understanding of what that student experience looks like for articulating students. Although they highlight the diversity of our tertiary sector whether that's from routes into universities from

colleges, or teaching approaches, or how we develop our students' academic skills, they also consider whether we are in fact 'problematizing articulation' which leads them into some pragmatic suggestions for how this conversation may unfold in the coming months and years. Their insightful comments here highlight how the incorporation of colleges into the tertiary sector could really shift our widening participation agenda and reporting. They also make valid points about the need for a shared language and terminology for our articulating students and finally show how the tertiary landscape can help forge stronger links between our colleges and universities, all of which can only enhance our students' learning experience.

Our final paper in this section lets us hear from the students themselves from City of Glasgow College, Edinburgh Napier University and the University of Edinburgh. In this opinion piece, we capture the reflections of some of our students to add their collective voices to this special issue. What comes across from all of them is a positive experience of learning (and in ways that go way beyond the formal curriculum) but also an openness and an honesty about the challenges they face too in terms of the cost-of-living crisis for example, and with mental health, with several of them reminding us they are the new post-Covid generation. However what is particularly interesting are their reflections on the nature of the 'tertiary sector' and their varied perspectives on what 'good teaching' looks like in their diverse contexts – a conversation to revisit with staff in the future.

Scotland has always been an outward looking nation and our education system too. In the first of three opinion pieces, we invited Andrée Surssock, from the European University Association to share her experiences which she offered through three lessons on a common approach to quality assurance and enhancement. What is striking about her insightful observations are the similarities we see between our enhancement-led approach in Scotland and approaches in Europe and Iceland. Surssock highlights the importance of context, which will of course be critical in our new tertiary sector where our institutions (comprising 19 universities and 24 colleges) vary so much in shape, size and mission as well as student demographics. She also encourages us not to be too inward focused on our academic standards but also to look upwards and across the horizon to see how our curricula are adapting to emerging societal shifts and sector 'disruptions' (our word) such as Generative AI and geopolitical shifts. Finally, Surssock reminds us that we do not live in a fairytale world and that our new tertiary quality framework will not necessarily offer us the happy ending we may long for. These wise words emphasise that only large-scale evaluation rather than an individualised accountability will create the collegiate and collaborative tertiary sector which will genuinely enable us to move forward together.

Our second opinion piece comes from Tracy Galvin from Ulster University, and we learn of the significant role Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is playing across the Irish sector as a collective way of pushing forward inclusive practices. The institutional need across the tertiary sector to evidence how they are embedding inclusive approaches makes it a useful driver to create this unified approach to enhancement, Galvin's piece argues strongly for this opportunity to embed UDL across a tertiary sector as a chance for us to address – collectively – the deep-rooted barriers of inequity of access within our universities and colleges. Here in Scotland, learning from this work in Ireland will be enormously beneficial for us especially given the social justice focus of our own enhancement-led sector and can potentially help us explore how we can plan for a more unified enhancement approach across the new tertiary sector?

Our third opinion piece, and final paper, takes the form of a discussion between two experienced educational developers from the Scottish sector, Veronica (Roni) Bamber, Professor Emerita in higher education at Queen Margaret University, and Lorraine Anderson, part of our JPAAP editorial team. Roni and

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Lorraine sat down with me, virtually, to debate definitions of tertiary, discuss the perennial challenges facing the sector and to share their initial thoughts and reflections on Scotland's Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework. In this frank and honest discussion, issues relating to values, identity and to potential 'elephants in the room' and the 'courageous conversations' that are needed to address these issues come to the fore. Our aim is that this special issue will kickstart some of those 'courageous conversations' across the sector through the reflections our articles aim to prompt.

We are aware that this special issue, designed to be published within weeks of the launch of the TQEF, cannot possibly capture the full breadth and depth of the implications of our new tertiary sector for learning and teaching across all of our 43 institutions. What we have hoped to offer, however, are snapshots from diverse perspectives so that we can begin (or even continue) our tertiary adventure as one sector. Our lens has covered the recent history of quality enhancement in Scotland from both sector-wide and individual perspectives where both the student and staff experiences are foregrounded. We have also homed in on individual institutions through our case studies to delve into more localised contexts to explore what is happening on the ground. What emerges from the panoramic view then is the urgent need to start a collective 'courageous conversation' about how we can best support our learners through the many and varied transitions the diversity of the sector demands. We start by inviting you to think through your own individual personal and professional lens, and through your institutional one(s) both former and current.

Catriona Cunningham

Lorraine Anderson

JPAAP Editors for the Tertiary special issue

### Biographies

*Catriona Cunningham* is Professor and Head of the Department of Learning and Teaching Enhancement at Edinburgh Napier University. Catriona is also the current Convener of the Scottish Higher Education Developers (SHED) Executive Committee and member of the JPAAP Editorial Board.

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