



## Student-ready transitions: A tertiary partnership model for regional student success

Luke Millard, Abertay University, Scotland

Jane Roscoe, Dundee and Angus College, Scotland

Jack Hogan, Abertay University, Scotland

### ABSTRACT

This case study presents a Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland pilot project that brought together Dundee and Angus College and Abertay University to explore how institutional alignment can enhance student success across the tertiary education landscape. With over 500 students transitioning annually from this college to its university partner, representing one-eighth of Abertay's student population, the project addresses a critical regional and social issue.

The initiative systematically reviewed the student journey from pre-enrolment through to graduation, identifying and removing barriers, both structural and cultural, that hinder progression. It reframes transition challenges not as student deficits, but as institutional shortcomings, echoing McNair et al.'s (2016) call for "student-ready" institutions.

This partnership model is underpinned by a commitment to regional ambition, student expectation, and institutional accountability. It challenges traditional sector boundaries and proposes a replicable framework for other institutions seeking to embed student success into the design of their transitions. Key interventions include a data-sharing agreement to streamline registration and support plans, joint staff development initiatives, and the refinement of an Associate Student offer to enhance value and visibility.

The case study contributes to the growing discourse on tertiary integration and offers practical insights into how colleges and universities can co-create environments where student success is not only possible but expected. It highlights the importance of shared ambition, integrated processes, and a commitment to student-centred design in enabling successful transitions in a tertiary world.

**Keywords:** transition, students, success, barriers, quality

### Introduction

This paper reports on how two partners, Dundee and Angus College and Abertay University, decided to work together to systematically and procedurally review how students can be enabled to succeed as they prepare for and transition from college into and through university. This saw the creation of a cross-institutional consultation and development process that put the student journey at the centre of all discussions.

This work was taking place at a complex time when many institutions were still trying to understand the impact of the pandemic on student behaviours and motivation. In addition, there was a cost of living crisis

which meant that many more students had to seek paid employment alongside their studies (Scottish Government, 2024); there was the emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) and a notable increase in the number of students declaring a registered disability. The question was posed as to whether enhanced institutional alignment and shared understandings that could start to address these issues and improve student success.

McNair et al (2016) challenged the sector to look inwardly at what the real barriers to student progress were. Universities and Colleges have for many years had transactional relationships, often dressed up as partnerships, that see students pass from one institution to another. Often, the focus is around student recruitment and ensuring compliance with institutional processes, rather than a genuine interest in preparing the student to be successful. McNair et al. (2016, p.81) ask us to consider “Are we understanding of the challenges and obstacles that students face today, and do we see these challenges not as reflecting students’ deficits, but as reflecting the deficits of our institutions”.

Within Scotland, Robertson and Cunningham (2023) considered the lived experiences of student transitions from College to University through a qualitative research synthesis. This took place as the Scottish sector began to transit towards a coherent tertiary education and skills system designed to ensure that colleges and universities start to address some of the challenges suggested by McNair et al. (2016).

## Context

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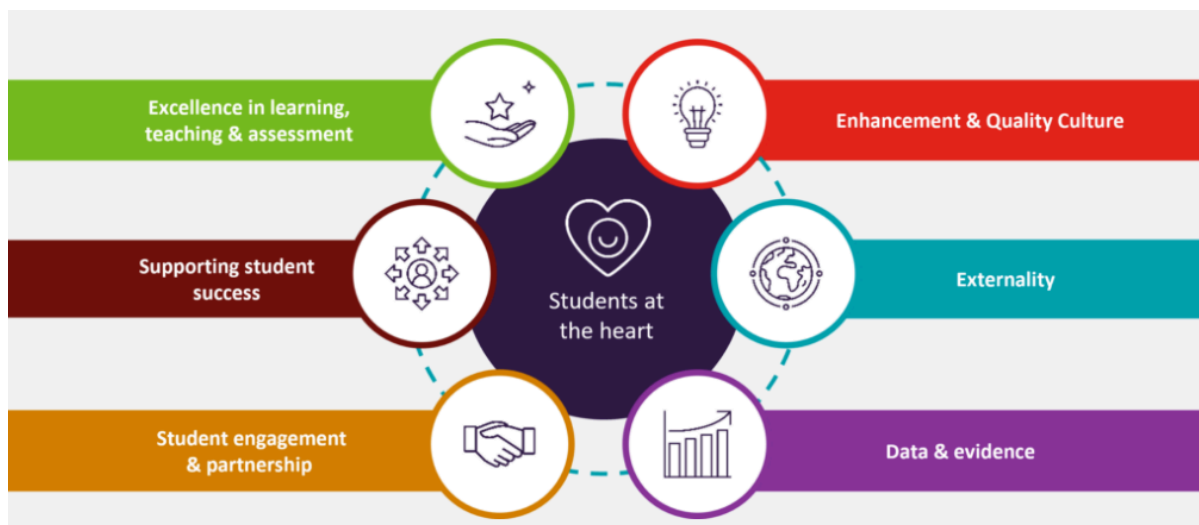
Dundee and Angus College (D&A) and Abertay University are both located in northeast Scotland in the city of Dundee. Abertay is a small university of around 5000 students focusing on applied sciences, business and technology-related degrees. D&A has three campuses and delivers over 900 courses, from introductory to postgraduate level, across a wide range of subjects to around 18,000 students.

In 2025, 536 (13%) of Abertay’s total student population originated from Dundee and Angus College. This figure can be further refined as those students are mainly undergraduate and equate to nearly 15% of the undergraduate population. This suggests that if the University could work more effectively with the College, those students could be better prepared to be successful through aligned processes, curriculum or community activities. The University is proud to be a widening access university with over 21% of students arriving from the most deprived backgrounds in Scotland. This results in the University viewing student retention as a key priority and one way to address that would be through working more effectively with its main provider of students on better preparing students to be successful.

## Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF)

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In addition, there are external drivers for change as the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has introduced a new quality review framework that focuses on the whole tertiary sector. This framework sees quality assurance and enhancement for colleges and universities brought together under the one unified process within Scotland’s Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF). The SFC vision is for a ‘more coherent and streamlined tertiary education system from the student perspective that delivers the best learning experience for students’ (SFC 2025). It is built upon the idea that quality assurance and enhancement processes should be designed to put students at the heart of the TQEF.

**Figure 1** The TQEF Principles

Source: permission granted by SFC

The TQEF has ambitions that align well with the approach adopted by the partners. In particular, it seeks to ‘create seamless pathways for learners and support more students to achieve positive outcomes’ and wants to ‘support more effective collaboration across colleges and universities, removing barriers to the sharing of innovation and learning, thereby promoting tertiary collaborations, where institutions wish to do so’.

The TQEF goals are laudable and the partners believe they are achievable as long as students are brought along on that journey, informing and advising as genuine collaborators. Whilst a focus on institutional alignment and process review is key, the purpose of such work should not be forgotten. Co-creation of elements of this work with students is possible and needed, whilst in other areas the challenge is to develop processes and opportunities that encourage genuine and purposeful engagement and enable students to see a way forward.

### Vision

Tinto (2017) talks of students needing ‘to want to persist and expend the effort to do so even when faced with the challenges they sometimes encounter. Without motivation and the effort it engenders, persistence is unlikely’. Student Motivation can be impacted by the smallest of things that persuade a student that it is not worth the effort to continue. The frustration of a university process not working or needlessly repeating a previous one can be the tipping point. Therefore, the removal of unintended barriers to student progress is a key part of the partners’ aims. However, alongside that is a desire to create a bridge between the two institutions that is seen as welcoming and enabling. The Abertay ambition is that every student at Dundee and Angus College sees Abertay as a natural and normal progression route, whilst from a College perspective the ambition is to ensure all students have the ability and knowledge to progress to the next stage of their academic journey and enhance their own personal development.

For that to be achieved students must develop the confidence and/or willingness to make that move. That can be partially enabled through institutional process, but it also requires clarity of thought around curriculum and academic support. Tinto commented on the work of Hall and Ponton (2005) that ‘one of the challenges of development education is not only helping students acquire needed academic skills but also

reshaping their belief in their ability to succeed'. If we can design into process and curriculum the ability to build student confidence, then they are more likely to achieve their goals.

Students who do not believe they fit into an institution often feel isolated. Thomas (2012) believed belonging was closely aligned to academic and social student engagement. She defined belonging as "students' subjective feelings of relatedness or connectedness to the institution". Thomas highlighted the work of Goodenow (1993), which described belonging in an educational environment as: "Students' sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class".

Robertson and Cunningham (2024) identified five factors that impacted on student transition in the Scottish sector. These included systemic barriers to academic alignment, the challenge of a transitional student identity and simple logistics.

Felten and Lambert (2020) challenged the sector to place relationships at the centre of a student's education; to look through the lens of relationships and to reimagine processes that enable positive student outcomes. The partners planned to work together to identify students who needed support, to inspire them to persist and then support them through mentoring or other curriculum- or community-focused actions that place relationship development and confidence building at the core.

Community is key and how this can be created through and across institutions is a challenge. Our belief is that this can be aligned to a student's purpose. "Why am I studying here, what do I want to achieve, who can help me?" are some of the questions that a student will be asking themselves as they develop. The partners aim to create clarity of pathways and enable relationships to develop through which students can feel supported on this journey.

This all-encompassing approach has been planned and addressed by institutional leaders across both institutions. However, for it to work there needs to be institutional buy-in and a cultural adaptation across both institutions that sees the real value of this activity. Lizzio's (2006) work around the five senses of the student lifecycle places institutional culture at the core and that will always be a challenge. Do we as a collective believe in designing all that we do, from curriculum to professional services, so that it enables students to be successful? Can we align our processes and remove those that create barriers to student progress? Finally, can we, as Felten and Lambert state, create institutional cultures that foster relationship building and then use that as a bridge for successful student transitions.

### Partnership Activities

Acknowledging that student success is not solely a product of academic capability (Lizzio, 2006) is key to answering these questions. It is deeply intertwined with motivation, belonging, and institutional culture. This collaborative project between Abertay University and Dundee and Angus College was designed to remove barriers to student progress and foster a culture of belonging, confidence, and purpose.

We approached the project pragmatically by proposing how, at the macro, meso and micro levels, we could drive this forward with shared ambition to create a seamless and supportive progression route from college to university.

The partners designed a series of collaborative activities that focused around 'the conversation'. The majority of people engaged in this work had never met each other, and therefore there was a need to build relationships before trying to break down processes or create new ones. In that light the events, which

were shared across the college and university, moved from the introductory to the provocation to the resolution as understandings were developed and solutions identified.

The work was led by the authors who established an atmosphere of positivity and a sense of opportunity, but who also were able to establish the importance of the project through the SFC imperatives of TQEF and a set of shared data around student transition, progression and success. This generated a shared understanding and a recognition of the opportunity.

Four groupings were established: institutional leaders; curriculum leaders; professional service leads and finally Students' Associations. Each grouping had a series of half days to move from building confidence and understanding to the desire to develop and innovate. On occasion these groupings were brought together for wider discussions or when issues overlapped.

The ambition and need for the work was recognised as attendance at the events by participants was excellent and consistent. Perhaps this was due to the evident strategic alignment with institutional need or perhaps the involvement of senior stakeholders was key. However, the participants were able to recognise a collective commitment to identifying and removing barriers through openness and a desire for systemic change that would help students. It is the authors' view that leadership engagement was crucial in legitimising the work and embedding it within institutional and therefore staff priorities.

At the meso level, the project focused on curriculum areas with 'additional funded places' (AFP). The AFP programme is funded by SFC and seeks to widen student access to university and to increase articulation into university courses. This sees students at the college being, in effect, pre-identified as university students, who happen to be studying at the college. This can lead to some misunderstandings across institutions as to who the student really belongs to and what support they should receive.

In this area, three curriculum teams from each partner worked together and focused on targeted development and evaluation activities. Two key staff sessions, one at Abertay and one at Dundee and Angus College, brought together stakeholders to map the student journey, identify accelerators and blockers, and to co-design solutions.

The first of these sessions provided an opportunity for participants to discuss what was working well and where they wanted to see improvements from their own sphere of influence: 'What can I bring, what is in it for my department, my institution, and how will this benefit our shared students'. It was soon recognised at this first meeting that working in partnership increases the likelihood of achieving shared ambitions and, importantly, strengthens our combined efforts, allowing us to create a greater, more meaningful impact on students' successful transitions than any one institution could achieve alone.

Accelerators included shared resources, co-teaching opportunities, and enhanced learning environments. For example, in civil engineering, collaboration enabled curriculum enrichment through shared expertise and delivery. These enhancements not only improved academic quality but also signalled to students that their learning journey was valued and supported through aligned effort and coordination.

Blockers, conversely, were often operational: misaligned timetables, unclear student identities, and administrative silos. One illustrative case involved a student whose funding was accidentally cancelled due to differing start dates between institutions. This issue was instantly resolved through dialogue and led to process realignment, demonstrating the collaboration in real-time action to remove barriers that might otherwise erode student motivation.

The sessions also addressed the ambiguity AFP students felt about their institutional identity. Were they Abertay students at the college, or college students linked to Abertay? This uncertainty impacted their

sense of belonging. As previously noted, Thomas (2012) and Goodenow (1993) highlighted that belonging means feeling accepted, valued, and encouraged by peers and staff. The project responded by exploring associate student status, shared curriculum activities, and student representation through the Students Association, all of which were aimed at strengthening students' connection to both institutions and a recognition that the student was the constant in this relationship.

Importantly, the sessions created space for staff to reflect on their own practices and assumptions. Curriculum and administrative teams, often working in silos, were encouraged to see the student journey as a shared responsibility. This shift in mindset was a key outcome, fostering a more holistic approach to student support.

At the micro level, the initiative focused on the lived experience of students. Felten and Lambert (2020) challenge the sector to place relationships at the centre of education, and this project embraced that challenge by embedding opportunities for connection and support into its design. One significant development was the introduction of a peer mentoring scheme, which emerged as a natural extension of the initial collaboration. Having recognised the potential to strengthen student confidence and persistence through peer support, the project team successfully secured funding from a local charitable fund. This enabled the establishment of a mentoring programme in which Abertay students, all of whom had previously studied at Dundee and Angus College, mentored AFP students. They offer guidance, encouragement, and a tangible sense of possibility. This initiative directly supports students' motivation and persistence by connecting them with relatable role models who have successfully navigated the transition. This co-delivered scheme was implemented from 2025-26 academic year and reflects a deepened commitment to relationship-building, recognising that students often thrive when they feel seen, supported, and connected to others who have walked a similar path.

Across the institutions it was felt there was a need to consider administrative processes and how they could be aligned to support student confidence and transition. There was an early identification around support for students with declared disabilities and their support needs. These had been assessed and documented at the college but then had to be repeated at the university and this would inevitably take some time at the start of a student's university journey when they were in most need of support. Could the documentation just transfer across? A data transfer agreement and process between the institutions was identified that means students no longer need to repeat their support needs, reducing friction and reinforcing a sense of being known and valued.

Staff development initiatives, such as shared workshops, further strengthen the relational fabric between institutions, ensuring that staff are equipped to support students holistically. A joint staff conference was held in June 2025 with over 80 staff and students. This staff development considered three broader themes which linked to the aims of the project, and discussions that had taken place at the meso level. The themes were compassion, community, and collaboration. This day saw workshops which engaged with compassionate approaches to student success with examples of practices shared through a trauma-informed perspective and community and collaboration through mentoring. In addition, a series of lightning talks were presented highlighting case studies of practice from both the college and the university which included compassionate communities and the college's status as a College of Sanctuary for refugees, the active learning network, developing learners' meta-skills through coaching conversation, AI as a collaborative tool, and sustainable development goals in the curriculum. Through the perspectives shared, colleagues were able to connect, share ideas and consider best practice from across both institutions as greater alignment continued to be explored, and that placed student success at the heart.

## Impact

### Theory of Change

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As Scotland's college and university sectors transition and adapt to the Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF, 2023), this partnership between Dundee and Angus College and Abertay University demonstrates how systematic institutional alignment can create meaningful change across multiple levels of the tertiary education system. This case study outlined the aims of the partnership alongside the range of activities to be undertaken.

A Theory of Change (ToC) is a useful framework for considering the short-, medium- and longer-term goals and impact of a given programme which aim to solve complex issues (Blamey & MacKenzie, 2007; Hansen et al., 2022). Therefore, a ToC enable issues to be untangled, and activities created with the outcomes and impact clearly articulated to stakeholders in a structured and transparent way.

This theory of change can be considered through a fundamental shared reframing that recognises barriers to student transition and success as not student deficits but as institutional deficits (McNair et al, 2016). When as discussed some of the challenges faced by students transitions between institutions are about fragmented processes and unclear expectations, the problem becomes structural and not individual. Therefore, the theory of change has focused predominantly on the institutional level (meso level) however the partners have engaged in micro- and macro-level activities.

Our core assumption is that successful student transition and success take place when institutions deliberately and systematically collaboratively design processes and activities. Linked to this, students need to feel inspired and motivated to attain and progress (Tinto, 2017), feel they belong (Thomas, 2012), and build genuine relations with peers, staff and faculty (Felten & Lambert, 2020).

This shared vision, then creates the environment from which relationships are built between institutions, and in turn creates actions which remove unintended barriers and build communities for students to thrive. Staff engaged in the process also move to a position of genuine and shared partnership. For the students, the ambition then becomes that their experience moves from transferring between institutions to progressing through a coherent system.

Although, this case study focuses on student transitions it goes beyond a focus on aspirations. Harrison (2018) argues that a theory of change must move beyond this focus as a basis for engaging students and widening access to higher education. Instead, the impact of this partnership and activities outlined can be considered through micro (individual), meso (institutional), and macro (systemic) activities. We can identify both the immediate outcomes and the longer-term transformational potential of this collaborative approach for the Scottish tertiary sector. Employing this approach enables us to rethink how a partnership approach to student transitions across tertiary institutions can be enabled.

### Micro Level (Individual)

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At the individual level, we can consider this through a student lens. The college mentoring project which looks to provide real models of successful transitions from Dundee and Angus College to Abertay University is an effective example. This aims to integrate students into the academic community and harness their identities as both a Dundee and Angus College student studying at Abertay University, and an Abertay University student studying at Dundee and Angus College. By role-modelling this identity development we

aim to increase student confidence and enable a smoother progression from one institution to another whilst retaining those identities. Longer term we will explore how these impact upon student retention rates and graduate outcomes.

### **Meso Level (Institutional)**

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At the meso level, institutional departments came together to share practice and untangle complex issues, often with relatively easy solutions which were enabled by creating capacity to speak openly and honestly. This saw curriculum, student services, and student association teams come together to enable the opportunity for process redesign and an enhanced shared understanding of the student transitional journey through engaging a new community of practice (Wenger, 1998). At the academic level the creation of the conditions and environment of time, which is often scarce, through facilitated sessions allowed for “rational and comprehensive approach to curricula design that is: Coherent... Integrated... Coordinated... Intentional... Cumulative... Interconnected... and Explicit” (Gale & Parker, 2011, pp. 27-28).

Key outcomes at the meso level included aligned administrative processes, shared curriculum development, and staff development allowing a shared understanding and exploration of both the college and university systems and processes.

### **Macro Level (Systemic)**

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Systemically this case study operationalises the TQEF principles through a practice-based approach which places students at the heart. The systemic change can be seen as cultural change as Morgan-Klein and Osborne (2007) argue that successful tertiary education requires the structure changes outlined at meso-level alongside cultural shifts in how partner institutions understand their role within the landscape and develop a shared understanding and trust. The approach adopted by the two partners is seen by some as sector leading and providing the model for such work. For example, as part of the TQEF, a strand of work is the Scotland’s Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP) where the theme ‘supporting diverse learning journeys’ is the focus from 2024-2028. This existing partnership work provides a model for achieving this sector ambition at a regional level and the authors have been encouraged to share their ambitions and outcomes at a sectoral level in support of STEP activities.

As Scottish institutions engage longer-term with the Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF, 2023) there is the potential for lessons to be drawn from the partnership work we have outlined in this paper.

### **Shared Vision**

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All stakeholders involved in the partnership activities need to have a shared understanding or ambition around student success. This requires a clarity of ambition that is co-created by both institutions and may draw on prior experiences, new aspirations and underpinning literature. As Thomas (2012) argues, institutional culture change begins with explicitly articulating values and ensuring these are embedded in practice rather than remaining aspirational statements.

This case study outlined the shared vision in the principle that transition challenges may often represent institutional deficits rather than student deficiencies (McNair et al., 2016). This vision created permission for stakeholders to question established practices and imagine and explore alternatives.

### Systematic Discovery

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Rather than implementing predetermined solutions, successful partnerships require systematic investigation of the actual student journey across institutional boundaries. This systematic discovery must involve multiple stakeholder groups and employ diverse methods to uncover both visible barriers and hidden challenges through the perspectives of the stakeholders (Gale & Parker, 2014). This approach was key through the collaborative scrutiny of the student journey by partnership teams.

Systematic discovery also creates ownership among staff who, through participation, become invested in implementing solutions. Trowler et al.'s (2014) research on change management in higher education, highlights that sustainable change emerges from engaged communities rather than imposed directions from senior leadership teams. This belief will be tested and monitored over the coming years.

### Multi-Layered Partnerships

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Effective partnerships operate at the same time across strategic, operational, and practice levels. The approach taken in this case study demonstrates how senior leadership commitment enables operational teams to consider solutions, which in turn empower individual teams to implement student-facing enhancements. In doing so, trust is developed through open and honest dialogue. This sees a relationship-rich approach (Felten and Lambert, 2020), not just from a student perspective of peer-to-peer, peer-to-faculty, and peer-to-staff but also from staff at both institutions engaged in building relationship-rich approaches with each other.

### Sustained Infrastructure

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Sustainable partnerships require dedicated infrastructure and commitment across governance structures, resources, communication mechanisms, and evaluation frameworks (Whitchurch, 2008). The establishment of a Strategic Partnership Board with termly meetings across both institutions provides the structural foundation for ongoing development beyond initial QAA project funding.

Infrastructure also includes professional development opportunities, shared physical and virtual spaces, and designated staff time. As Knight and Trowler (2001) observe, without such infrastructure, partnerships risk becoming dependent on individual champions whose departure threatens continuity.

Importantly, sustained infrastructure enables partnerships to evolve responsively. Rather than fixing solutions developed during an initial project phase, effective infrastructure creates capacity for continuous improvement as student needs, policy contexts, and institutional priorities shift over time.

### Conclusions

Partnership working is not easy, and it requires persistence. However, with the right colleagues it can be some of the most interesting and enjoyable work that one can do. For the project leaders at both partners this has been a journey full of discovery and one that has worked because the leaders in both partners had the institutional authority to challenge and drive change. Most of that journey has been positive, but there have also been questioning moments when strange processes or beliefs were identified.

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From a project perspective the partnership development and shared understandings that have been developed have been transformational. Key lessons emerged that have relevance well beyond the specific Abertay/Dundee and Angus College context.

From a student perspective, belonging does not just happen: it needs design. Student identity matters. Ambiguity around institutional affiliation can impact motivation and engagement, so it must be intentionally designed into systems and structures. From shared events to mentoring schemes, every touchpoint can either reinforce or undermine a student's sense of belonging.

Cross-institutional collaboration requires intentionality. While shared ambitions exist, operational differences can create friction. When staff understand the student journey across institutions, they are better equipped to support transitions and foster confidence. We saw that clear messaging and inclusive practices help students feel part of a learning community and that small fixes can have big impacts. The resolution of the funding issue due to mismatched start dates is a reminder that sometimes, removing a single barrier can make the difference between persistence and withdrawal.

Culture change is slow but necessary. Lizzio's (2006) framework reminds us that institutional, departmental, and programme cultures underpin student success and therefore require alignment.

This project has begun to shift that culture, but sustained effort is required. By engaging multiple stakeholders across both Abertay and Dundee and Angus College the project was able to extend its influence beyond isolated interventions. It created a networked approach to change, where ideas and solutions could be scaled, adapted, and embedded across departments and campuses. This collective momentum not only accelerated progress but also ensured that improvements were more sustainable.

Felten and Lambert (2020) advocate for placing relationships at the heart of education. This project affirms that doing so is not only possible, but necessary and transformative. It challenges us to move beyond institutional boundaries and commit to collaborative practice designs that ensure every student develops a sense of confidence and believes in their capacity to succeed as they move through their educational journey. This case study invites the tertiary sector to consider how we might reimagine progression not as a leap, but as a bridge- one built collaboratively, intentionally, and with care.

#### Biographies

*Professor Luke Millard* is Dean of Learning and Teaching, and Head of the AbLE Academy at Abertay University in Scotland. He is a Professor of Student Development and a Principal Fellow of the UK's Higher Education Academy.

*Jane Roscoe* is Director of Curriculum and Partnerships at Dundee and Angus College and has over twenty years of experience in secondary schools and colleges. Her background in social work and third sector organisations drives her commitment to social justice and belief in education's transformative power.

*Jack Hogan* is a Lecturer in Academic Practice at Abertay University and part of the AbLE Academy. He is also a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Jack has previously hosted and co-chaired the European First Year Experience Conference and European Access Network Conference.

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