Developing a new whole institutional approach to teaching and learning enhancement

A case study from Abertay University

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1. Introduction

This paper provides an account of the development and implementation of Abertay University's new teaching and learning enhancement (TLE) strategy, which was approved in December 2013. Details on the context and drivers for change, processes that were adopted, implementation to date, and evaluative evidence are presented. Following approval, significant progress has been made with implementation over the last 18 months and a number of policy changes have already been successfully introduced. The curriculum reform aspect of the TLE strategy is, however, still being implemented as delivery of our new undergraduate curricula and portfolio will take place from September 2016.

1.1 Background

Abertay University (Abertay) is a modern university but with a long history of educating students; it was founded as the Dundee Technical Institute in 1888. Founded on a clearly expressed set of 'Abertay Attributes', the University's courses have always been designed to develop confident, independent thinkers who are ready for the world of work. According to government figures, Abertay is Scotland's best modern university for helping students to progress in their studies and one of the leading centres for wider access in the sector; in academic year 2014-15, 27% of our students articulated from local colleges, rising to 34% in 2015/16.

Our new 2015-20 strategic plan (Abertay 2015) outlines three key purposes for our institution:

- to offer transformational opportunities to everyone who has the ability to benefit from Abertay's approach to university education;
- to inspire and enable our students, staff and graduates to achieve their full potential;
- to use our knowledge and expertise to have a positive impact on the world around us.

With a reputation for developing innovative, exciting courses, Abertay is known internationally in the fields of Computer Games Technology, Computer Arts, Environmental Management and Biotechnology, and offers courses in fields as diverse as Psychology, Ethical Hacking, Forensic Science, Business, Civil Engineering, and Sports across its four academic Schools: Dundee Business School; the School of Arts, Media and Computer Games; the School of Science, Engineering and Technology; and the School of Social and Health Sciences. There are approximately 3,800 undergraduate students and 180 academic staff across the four Schools.

The University is proud of its track record in teaching and supporting learning; the relatively small size of the institution means that the level of support and face-to-face contact with staff is greater and perhaps more personal than in other, larger universities. However, it is also fair to say that the University experienced an unsettled recent history, and the appointment of Professor Nigel Seaton as University Principal in 2012 provided an important catalyst for transformational change and systemic reforms across the institution. I was appointed as Director of Teaching and Learning Enhancement (TLE) in April 2013. The primary purpose of my role is to “oversee the development and successful implementation of the University Quality Enhancement Strategy and all quality enhancement related plans, ensuring progression and improvement in teaching, learning, assessment and employability initiatives, translating into a positive student experience.” This paper documents the story so far.

1.2 Context for change

Teaching and learning in higher education (HE) has encountered a period of transformation driven by changes to university funding, increased student diversity, increased demands from learners and policymakers for increased flexibility and choice, significant advances in technology and, critically, the evolving global context and complex societal challenges.

In the UK, the biggest perceptible change in higher education policy over the last five years has been around student funding. This was precipitated in 2010 by the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance in England chaired by Lord Browne, (DBIS, 2010). Although a number of the review's proposals were not adopted, it significantly influenced the UK Government’s 2011 white paper Putting Students at the Heart of the System, laying the policy foundations of a market-driven HE system in England. This agenda has been
subsequently progressed further and more recently the English sector has been consulted on proposals to move to a risk-based approach to quality assurance. (HEFCE 2015)

These changes in England have catalysed changes in the other home nations. Scotland’s enhancement-led education system is distinct from the rest of the UK and the Scottish Government has remained resolute in publicly funding higher education, with Alex Salmond famously stating in March 2011 that “the rocks will melt with the sun before I allow tuition fees to be imposed on Scottish students – upfront or backdoor.” (BBC News 2015) The Scottish Government also published its White paper in 2011, entitled Putting Learners at the Centre. (SG 2011)

Despite the very different policies of the UK and Scottish Governments, it is worth noting the striking similarity of the titles of their white papers (“Putting Students at the Heart of the System” cf. “Putting Learners at the Centre”).

1.3 A new pedagogic model for Abertay

Education has perceptibly moved away from approaches that transmit knowledge from teacher to learner; a so-called Scholar Academic ideology of curriculum, (Schiro, 2008) as this tends to encourage a more superficial, surface-learning style, which in turn provides less effective educational gains for students. Instead, rather than relying on learning facts and figures, enquiry or problem-based approaches have been shown to promote deeper learning and conceptual understanding which can then be applied in a range of situations. This philosophy of education was first famously articulated by Dewey, commonly regarded as the father of experiential learning, in the late 19th century (see e.g. Dewey 1897) and forms the basis of Kolb’s (Kolb 1984) experiential learning style theory. Contemporary concepts such as “students as producers” (Neary, Stevenson and Ball 2009), “students as co-creators” (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten 2011) and “students as partners” (HEA 2013), are all founded on the notions that students ought to be actively engaged in their own learning and have a significant role to play in the learning process.

Further, both staff and students are considered as learners in the context of the Abertay community. In terms of curriculum development, the move towards students critically analysing, applying and extending newly gained knowledge through experiential problem-based learning can be described as a “Praxis” rather than “Product” approach (Grundy 1987).

At Abertay, all recent major academic reforms have been approached by going back to first principles and providing solutions that are right for our context. A decision was made early on in the TLE strategy’s development that although a new strategy was required, the fundamental purpose and values of the institution should be retained. The ten key principles for our new teaching and learning strategy, which were agreed by the University, are as follows:

1. To provide more breadth as well as depth of knowledge, aiding student choice and flexibility.
2. To enhance graduates’ employability and entering skills.
3. To internationalise the student experience for all students.
4. To create more flexible learner journeys and degree pathways.
5. To embed technology enhanced learning.
6. To strengthen formative assessment, emphasising the importance of ‘feed forward’ to support deeper student learning.
7. To recognise wider student achievement beyond the formal curriculum.
8. To recognise and reward excellence in teaching.
9. To develop a staff-centred, flexible approach to CPD.
10. To encourage scholarly communities of practice across the University, including networking, sharing of practice and collaborative working.

The uniqueness of the model lies in its totality rather than the individual parts. At the outset, there were instances of practice in Abertay that aligned with various (but not all) aspects of this model, and a key challenge facing the University has been to raise the bar of practice for uniform quality across provision.
1.4 Abertay’s TLE strategy – summary

The University’s vision is to create a distinctive Abertay student-learning experience that has the potential to transform its students’ lives and is recognised globally. The new strategy aims to improve the University’s future competitiveness and distinctiveness, support fresh ideas, precipitate a systemic change in practices and promote an institutional culture which embraces these changes.

The TLE strategy that has been developed is very short, less than 850 words, but is action focused and has been designed to catalyse substantial change. There are three strategic objectives:

1. **Reforming our curriculum** to revolutionise the delivery and design of our programmes, which will advance students’ knowledge; enhance students’ preparedness for post-graduation and the world of work; and that recognises and facilitates different modes of learner journey.

2. **Incentivising students’ performance** through a new integrated approach to all aspects of assessment (formative, summative and recording achievement) with a focus on programme level learning outcomes, joint Honours/Grade Point Average (GPA) degree classification and implementation of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) for 2014-15 entrants.

3. **Raising the status of teaching** in the institution in terms of: leadership, professional recognition, reward and development by developing a holistic, staff-centred approach to learning and teaching CPD from 2014-15.
2. Strategy development process

When I was tasked to develop a new institutional enhancement strategy at the outset of my appointment in April 2013, it was approximately half way through the University’s then overall strategic plan (2011-15), twelve months after the latest QAA institutional review (ELIR) and, helpfully, the national Enhancement Theme was ‘Developing and Supporting the Curriculum’. I was keen to take an evidence-based, inclusive approach but simultaneously recognised the importance of ensuring that the proposed direction of travel aligned with the Executive’s vision as the new teaching and learning strategy would provide an influential road map for the subsequent new 2015-20 University strategic plan.

I initially undertook desk-based research reviewing other universities’ teaching and learning strategies and contemporary examples of whole institutional approaches to curriculum (Blackmore & Kandiko 2012) - Universities of Aberdeen (2009) and Southampton (2015), and Education Scotland (2015). Key points arising from the literature were the general moves towards providing students with opportunities to study more subjects outside their formal programme and increased inter-disciplinarity in undergraduate education. This is synergistic with a liberal arts type higher education model and parallels developments in Curriculum for Excellence for Scottish education (ages 3-18). Abertay, helpfully, already had a significant amount of applied provision involving a range of disciplines; however, student choice within programmes was rather limited and clearly an area for review under any new strategy.

In parallel, a series of introductory meetings were held with key stakeholders across the University: Heads of School and Professional Services, the Directors of Academic Programmes in the Schools (effectively School Directors of Learning and Teaching) and student sabbatical officers. These proved key to relationship building and gaining a better understanding of colleagues’ roles in the University, their challenges, priorities and ideas for future development. An important point here is that in the initial stages I was in listening mode rather than proposing ideas to staff.

Taking the literature review and initial key informant interviews together, I drafted a set of principles which ought to underpin any new strategy and refined these with the Vice Principal (Academic) and one of the Heads of School who had an institutional-wide support role in quality enhancement. These principles were distilled into three strategic priorities entitled ‘Reforming our curriculum’, ‘Incentivising student performance’ and ‘Raising the status of teaching’ which formed the basis of a position paper for Executive approval. The next stage was to work the proposals up further for wider consultation. These initial stages of the process took approximately three months.

The consultation stage involved a series of ‘open house’ meetings over a six-week period. This included meeting individual Schools, Professional Services, Student Association, Student class reps, staff unions and a University-wide workshop (attended by around 60 staff). In addition to these face-to-face engagements, written comments were invited which resulted in just five responses: two from Schools and three from professional services teams.

The responses were overwhelmingly positive and provided not only feedback but also suggestions for contributing to the successful implementation of the strategy. Some concerns were raised, however, about the language in the draft strategy, for example, use of words like “transformation in curriculum”, “inculcate” and “indoctrinate” were felt to be overly directive and the text in the revised version was modified accordingly. Resourcing and practical implications of offering students more choice were also raised.

The University’s Teaching and Learning Committee approved a revised strategy in November 2013, and Senate the following month. It is important to note that the final approval stages through the University’s committee process were very smooth. The extensive consultation process (eight months in total) – and concerted effort to engage with staff, listen to their concerns and ideas and try, where possible, to accommodate them – meant that there was a higher degree of ownership and buy-in for colleagues at the end.
3. Implementation

This section details overall timelines, progress on each of the three strategic priorities, and offers reflections on some of the processes adopted to support successful change.

3.1 Timeline

The time between initial conceptualisation of the new strategy and complete implementation will be just over three years. Some areas were prioritised for initial action and implementation such as building a strong enhancement-led community of practice, assessment and feedback whereas curriculum reform has necessarily taken longer given the range of complexities and lead-in time required. The overall implementation timeline is provided in Appendix A.

3.2 Commentary on ‘reforming our curriculum’

The University’s Teaching and Learning committee commissioned a specific Curriculum Reform steering group¹ to develop a set of first principles, within the parameters of the strategic plan, to guide policy and practice. Following agreement, a systematic review of existing provision was undertaken and a specific evaluation framework was devised which could be used to monitor provision on a regular basis going forward (see Appendix B). Few other examples in the open literature of such frameworks could be found and we believe that ours is distinctive; in line with one of our strategic principles of “choosing our own path” (2015-20 Abertay University strategic plan).

A major driver for curriculum reform has been to increase student choice and flexibility. We have aimed to achieve this through a variety of means; to move from programme to subject-based curriculum development, offer seven new accelerated degree programmes – which allow students to complete a four year Honours degree in just over three years – and by introducing new inter-disciplinary electives for stage one and two students. Although subject-based curricula design is quite common in other universities, it has proved quite challenging at Abertay given the applied, inter-disciplinary nature of many of our degrees, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), for example, Computer Games Technology, Forensic Science, and Cyber Security.

¹ Vice Principal Academic, Heads of School, Directors of Academic Programmes, Director of TLE, Academic Quality Manager, Director of Strategic Planning, Registrar, Head of Academic Partnerships, Head of Student Services, Student Association President and Vice President plus invitees as required by agendas for each meeting.
**New credit-bearing inter-disciplinary electives**

The approach taken to develop our new inter-disciplinary electives illustrates our strategy of combining senior management vision and steer with operational ideas driven by the academic community. A set of criteria which all new electives had to fulfil were developed by members of the Curriculum Reform steering group and an open call was then made for staff to propose initial ideas. An open invitation workshop was held for staff to discuss ideas, seek clarity on what was being sought and identify possible opportunities for collaboration. The steering group evaluated the proposals and in some cases it was recommended that two proposals work together on a revised joint module, to minimize overlap. It was extremely interesting to see that although there had been an open call, the final 21 electives selected for delivery could be categorised into four themes:

- deep thinking;
- modern society and culture;
- popular science;
- sustainability and wellbeing.

All modules underwent a specific quality review process, which included a senior external panel member from a university that also had recently undergone whole institution curriculum reform. This proved extremely helpful; we received positive feedback and reassurance on our approach and endorsement of the final portfolio of electives. We subsequently decided to offer a limited number (10) of new electives in 15-credit format for stage one students only in 2015-16 then offer all 21 in 20-credit format for stage one and two students from 2016-17. Professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) requirements have prevented a couple of programmes from allowing students to take these new electives, however, programme leaders have been encouraged to provide alternative options to enhance student choice of existing programmes.

**Abertay attributes**

In 2007, Abertay was the first Scottish university to develop a set of graduate attributes listed explicitly within its overall strategy (Abertay University 2007). Despite some minor subsequent modifications, an internal project commissioned in summer 2013 – which consulted stakeholders across the institution – recommended the need to take a more radical review. The Teaching and Learning committee set up a short-life working group in early 2014 which met several times over four months to take things forward. The group, comprising about 13 staff and student representatives, spent the first couple of meetings focused on language and semantics before concluding that a complete rethink was required. A systematic review of institutions’ website information on graduate attributes was undertaken as well as primary research with a selection of our students, seeking their views on what they perceived as the value of an Abertay experience and gaining 532 responses. Although very helpful, the breakthrough came when we stopped trying to tweak what we already had and developed a new conceptual framework comprising four dimensions: intellectual, personal, professional, and active citizen. It became quickly evident that this provided a much more useful tool to engage staff and students and a series of accompanying qualitative descriptors were subsequently written for each dimension (see Appendix C) which could be further contextualised for particular disciplines, etc.

The attributes obviously describe the Abertay student experience but also, more generally, the ethos of the University and, as such, have much wider applicability than our students hence they have become Abertay Attributes and have aided the development of the University’s 2015-20 strategic plan. They have also provided a key reference point for curriculum design and have the potential to aid student reflection and personal development, thereby enhancing their employability.

In terms of process, it is important to highlight the benefits of going back to first principles (what does/should an Abertay education offer), taking an evidence-based approach (desk-based plus primary), creating a specific task-finish group involving the key actors and embracing emergent change albeit within clear parameters set by the University Executive. This process worked well and, I believe, resulted in a much better outcome, shaped and influenced by a range of colleagues but clearly led.
3.3 Commentary on ‘incentivising student performance’

Assessment and feedback is a key priority for Abertay, as for many other UK universities. Our NSS scores in this area vary significantly across programmes and a key challenge has been to ensure a high, consistent bar. In 2013, there were pockets of excellent practice, however, at an institutional level there were concerns that students were generally over assessed, there was not a culture of formative as well as summative assessment and timeliness for returning feedback was an issue as was perceived usefulness of feedback, in some areas. This was therefore earmarked as an area for urgent development, and a small working group was tasked with rethinking assessment and feedback at Abertay\(^2\). The group developed a set of Assessment principles (Appendix D), which were consulted on widely via open-invite workshops for staff and meetings with the Student Association before being approved through the University’s committee structure. These principles laid the foundations for a new assessment policy, which stipulated restrictions on number of units of assessment per module (two for 15 credit modules, three for 30) and feedback turnaround time (10 working days, 15 working days for end of term assessments, which is potentially sector leading). These principles were rooted in academic literature but contextualised for our institution (HEA 2012; University of Strathclyde 2014; University of Edinburgh 2015).

**New literal grading scale and grade point average (GPA)**

These new assessment principles also catalysed a review of Abertay’s grading scale and degree awards. Senate had agreed that the current Honours degree classification system was not fit for purpose in 2012-13 but on its replacement. The assessment task group devised a new ten-point literal grading scale (F to A+ with corresponding grade points of 0.0 to 4.5, respectively) and associated Grade Point Average system (GPA) – based on student performance at stages three and four only – to calculate Honours degrees for all students graduating from July 2016. At the time of writing, Abertay is only one of two universities in the UK to have fully implemented the GPA; however, a report from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in May 2015 has recommended a sector-wide move to a GPA system for degree awards (HEA 2015) .

Drivers for our introduction of the GPA included:

- greater international portability than the UK Honours classification system;
- further granularity in detail of a student’s performance and avoidance of the 2:1/2:2 “cliff edge”;
- helping to incentivise student performance throughout their degree programme, not just in the final Honours year;
- the principle of GPA aligns better with Abertay’s new TLE strategy than the traditional Honours classification alone and it complements the HEAR.

There was much debate within the University on the new grading scale; whether to include ‘minus’ as well as ‘plus’ sub divisions, which stages GPA should be based upon, and issues around numerical-only assessments, etc. However, in practice this year, it has been found to operate well overall. Where there have been implementation issues, it has been largely because assessments were not redesigned to take account of the new grading scale and GPA.

Other major assessment-related developments have been in the area of recognising wider student achievements and the introduction of the HEAR\(^3\). This has been particularly welcomed by the student body, and the Student Association, as it gives institutional recognition to a much wider range of student achievements, a number of which are offered by the Student Association. The introduction of the HEAR has also created a stronger partnership between the Student Association and the University, closer working relations between various Professional Services and Schools and it catalysed an overhaul of our academic prizes. This last point is important as previously prizes’ criteria varied significantly, they were unequal in number between Schools, and not always well publicised to

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\(^2\) Vice Principal Academic, Director of Teaching and Learning Enhancement, a Head of School and Deputy Secretary (Academic Governance)

\(^3\) [http://www.hear.ac.uk](http://www.hear.ac.uk) (accessed 16/03/16)
students. The HEAR has really raised the status of our prizes and is leading to a growing number of HEAR-verifiable achievements as staff realise its potential and students call for more such opportunities.

It is important to point out two other major developments to enhance assessment and feedback policy and practice at Abertay. From September 2015 we will have moved to full institutional implementation of Electronic Management of Assessment (EMA), both in terms of student submission and student feedback from staff. This has been remarkably swift (just over a year from proposal to full implementation) and although some staff were initially resistant, with some support and minimal additional equipment (e.g. two monitors), they have found the new system to be more efficient and effective. It facilitates higher quality and faster turnaround of feedback for students and is easier to assess for staff.

Coinciding with the new assessment policy in 2014-15 has been the development and implementation of a new pedagogically focused academic calendar. This includes new mid-term 'structured feedback' weeks, which have been at module, programme or School level. The idea is that students undertake an activity in that week to make greater sense their learning in the module/programme to date and apply it in a meaningful, formative way. All assessment in that week has to be formative and delivered during that week with emphases on 'feedforward' as well as feedback. Success this year has been varied for a variety of reasons: lack of clarity and buy-in among staff on the purposes of feedback week, mixture of module and programme-level activities and changes to student timetables compared with the rest of the term which has affected attendance, etc. However, where it has worked, it has worked well and the students who have engaged reported positive benefits. Interestingly though, it is often the more able students who have engaged, and the formative nature of the week has brought to the surface how a number of our students’ naturally take a narrow, somewhat instrumental approach to their learning. Further guidance for staff and support for students is has now been approved, taking on board the observations from 2014-15.

3.4 Commentary on ‘raising the status of teaching’

Staff development was identified as a priority by ELIR in 2012 and the University’s then Quality Enhancement Committee established a working group to develop an associated action plan. My introductory discussions with senior managers and academics alike also revealed an appetite for a fresh approach and the need to be joined up and coherent. There was also recognition that enhancing the quality of teaching was paramount and that investment in staff development was critical. Finally, there was a perception among colleagues that professionalism and excellence in teaching was inadequately recognised by the institution although initiatives such as the student-led teaching awards (introduced in 2009-10) had been very popular and valued among staff. It was for all of these reasons that the third strategic priority for TLE became ‘Raising the status of teaching’.

Building a strong community of practice -

Network for Teaching and Learning Enhancement (NetLE)

The initial priority was to galvanise interest within the University and create a strong community of practice. Activity was initiated within weeks of taking up my role with a seminar in June of 2013 on “The future of Scottish higher education in 2016 and beyond ... through the lens of teaching and learning enhancement” to launch a series of monthly seminars. These have proved very popular since, and I think that this is because: (a) they have been focused on priority areas for development at Abertay; (b) they provide a forum for a networking lunch with colleagues from across the University; (c) existing best practice within Abertay is showcased which provides an opportunity to learn from others and (d) they have been used as a consultation forum on policy developments allowing a wide cross section of academic and services staff to input ideas and concerns.

The community of practice was entitled ‘Network for Teaching and Learning Enhancement’ (NetTLE) and a dedicated section of Abertay’s intranet and social media presence (Yammer, Twitter) followed suit, providing channels for communication and promoting engagement. Wenger (1998) has written extensively on communities of practice, and has developed a conceptual framework for thinking about learning as a process of social participation that chimes perfectly with the approach that NetTLE has taken.

Notions of student-centred learning are well established, however, a similar approach to staff development has lagged behind with institutions offering fairly rigid PG Certificates in HE Teaching (or equivalent). I espoused the term ”staff-centred professional development” in Robertson (2013), and this drove Abertay's development of a...
more flexible continuing professional development (CPD) scheme for teaching and learning, which includes a revised PG Certificate in HE Teaching. The new PG CertHET offers much more flexibility, choice and, therefore, personalisation, in recognition of the diversity of colleagues’ roles in the University who take the programme. The overall CPD scheme ‘Going for Gold’ is aligned with all four UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) descriptors and was accredited by the HEA for three years from September 2015. In 2013, no staff at Abertay had national professional recognition beyond Fellow (FHEA). Therefore, in order to create a cohort of champions, a small-scale initiative was run on a peer-support basis using triads rather than simple one-to-one pairings to support a group of staff to achieve senior national professional recognition. All colleagues who submitted an application to HEA were successful and therefore the University gained its first six Senior Fellows of the HEA (SFHEA) and first Principal Fellow (PFHEA). Following this success, a larger number of staff took part in the 2014-15 CPD pilot scheme which 17 staff successfully completed. 104 staff at Abertay have national professional recognition through the HEA, including 3 Principal Fellows and 16 Senior Fellows, which represents more than 50% of our staff with a teaching role and far exceeding national averages. A target has been set in the new university strategic plan whereby by 2020 we will: “Ensure all staff involved in teaching and supporting learning achieves appropriate national professional recognition” and we are well placed to achieve this.

**Abertay Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (ATLEF)**

In order to realise our TLE ambitions, it was recognised early on that dedicated resource to support innovation was required. External funding for learning and teaching innovation has become rather limited in recent years (e.g. cessation of the HEA’s Teaching Development Grant scheme), and so a new internal scheme, the Abertay Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (ATLEF) was launched in October 2013 to support the implementation of the University’s TLE Strategy, to develop new leading practice, and to build capacity for scholarship in teaching and learning. It is largely funded internally but with additional helpful support from the national Enhancement Themes. So far, there has been three ATLEF calls focused on the TLE strategy, innovations in the curriculum and, most recently, ‘student transitions’. ATLEF has already generated a significant amount of interest and engagement internally and has encouraged some colleagues’ first proper forays into pedagogic action research. Another positive spin off of ATLEF is that an increasing number of students (undergraduate and postgraduate) have been employed as researchers and in some cases have helped shape and design the research. Building on this, the latest ATLEF call has stipulated active student engagement in the research process (not just as subjects of research) as a principle of all funded projects. ATLEF projects have been disseminated internally via workshops, reports and at a very successful conference in October 2014 that was attended by 150 people from across Scotland and the rest of the UK. The University’s profile has also been raised externally through the initiative. Colleagues have been invited to give talks at national and international conferences, for example, on ‘Equality and Diversity in HE’ and an ATLEF project leader won the Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (sparqs) 2015 award for ‘Partnership in the classroom’.

Going forward in 2015-16, we have formally launched our fully HEA-accredited CPD scheme (with a cohort of 41 colleagues taking part) and are rolling out a bespoke Leadership programme for newly appointed middle managers in the four Schools; a cohort of four new Academic Curriculum Managers, and 11 new Heads of Division. This will incorporate action learning as part of the programme, for example, designing a new University-wide workload-planning model.
4. Evaluation

The implementation of the TLE strategy is ongoing, and therefore the full impact of the reforms is yet to be realised. However, progress has been rapid and is being monitored by both quantitative and qualitative methods at a variety of different levels: University, School, Division, programme and module. QA monitoring and reporting provides helpful data through annual School/Service reporting, programme approvals, external examiners reports, accreditation panels, module assessment grades and degree classification profiles.

Student feedback is taken very seriously and a combination of internal and external (NSS) surveys is used. Abertay did not enter the NSS until 2012 which makes it difficult to make definitive comments on improvements as we only currently have three years of data. However, our scores on Assessment and Feedback have increased significantly in 2015. For question seven (“Feedback on my work has been prompt”) Abertay scored 44% satisfaction in 2013, 47% in 2014 and 59% in 2015 – a jump of 12% in just one year. This points to the significant positive impact of our new Assessment policy introduced for 2014-15, which stipulates a ten working day feedback turnaround time for in-term assessments. The improvement in student satisfaction for question nine (“Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand”) is marked over the last two years: 54% in 2013 rising to 62% in 2014 and 67% in 2015. The steadier increase for this question is an indicator of enhancement of assessment practices among staff in the institution since the introduction of the TLE strategy rather than the step change for question seven which is probably due to policy changes for 2014-15. Overall student satisfaction (question 22) has also risen by 2% from 2014 to 86% in 2015; the joint seventh highest score for Scottish HEIs participating in the NSS. It is hoped that scores across the teaching and learning-related scales of NSS will continue to improve as the full effect of the changes bed in.

Since 2013, the University has also undertaken systematic analyses of quantitative and qualitative NSS results, identified areas of good practice and development and shared these with Schools for onward dissemination/action. In addition, internal student surveys are undertaken and this year the University has run a mid-term module survey and an annual programme-level student survey. The questions are based upon the NSS and an online-only survey instrument is used. Again, data is shared with Heads of School and relevant Heads of Service, for example, student support, library, etc., as required. Response rates are a continued challenge (approximately 15% although there is significant variation) but a revised class representative system for 2015-16 provides helpful opportunities for more student-led campaigns and closing the loop more effectively.

As mentioned in section three under ‘Raising the status of teaching’, the University has set an ambitious target for all staff who teach/support learning to achieve national professional recognition by 2020. By the end of 2015, 50% of teaching staff are predicted to have achieved national professional recognition. It is a condition of probation to complete the PG Cert HET for staff with a substantive teaching role and the new CPD scheme ‘Going for Gold’ has been very successful, however, it is recognised that the strategic plan has set a stretching target. The Abertay TLE team plays a critical role in supporting academic staff development and recognition.

4.1 Actors’ perspectives on implementation

As part of documenting this case study, a short qualitative study has been undertaken. Forty-seven key stakeholders at Abertay were contacted by individual email and asked to provide a 300 word summary of their perspectives of the key successes and outstanding challenges posed by the new TLE strategy and its implementation. Twenty-five responses were received from members of the University Executive, Heads of School and Service, academics, professional services staff, Student Association sabbaticals and a couple of students. Colleagues’ comments have been extremely helpful in informing this report and have been fed into the reflections presented in other sections. A selection of these quotes is presented below, which have been categorised in line with various aspects of the TLE strategy.

A couple of respondents commented on their experience at Abertay prior to the recent raft of changes and noted the positive step change since:

Most discussion internally in T and L was about compliance [and there was] very little indeed in relation to improving learners’ ability to manage their own learning. (Head of School)

It’s good to work in an environment where change is happening – it felt that we were moribund for a long time and so it’s a relief that we have been moving forward the past couple of years. (Division Leader)
Reforming our curriculum

A number of respondents commented on the extent and pace of change:

*I have been impressed with the dynamism of the curriculum reform process.* (Head of School)

The major challenges have been the short timescale though this has given the implementation some energy and focus. I am impressed at how the academic community have risen to the challenge of re-conceptualising their programmes. (Services Manager)

The curriculum reforms have been broadly welcomed and have provided a timely opportunity to rethink programmes:

*Staff have welcomed the move to 20 credits and in most cases have used this to seriously examine the fitness for purpose of some previous curricular material and have seized this opportunity to make the curriculum contemporary and relevant.* (Head of School)

*As the Division staff makeup now differs considerably from when the old degrees were designed the opportunity to shape the degree structure and write new modules has given current staff more ownership of modules and they are enthusiastic about running the new modules in 2016.* (Division Leader)

It has, however, challenged colleagues and required a different mind-set for curriculum design:

*The view of academic staff on the curriculum has changed markedly with staff now having a more subject centred approach to the curriculum ... This has been a culture change for staff who have seen many years of a programme centred approach to the curriculum.* (School Director of Academic Programmes)

Curriculum reform has also been a key driver for the University’s new Internationalisation strategy:

*One of the most crucial drivers for moving forward has been the change of students’ understanding of the value and importance of international experience with regards to future career prospects. The demand for international opportunities has risen significantly and the International Office is constantly looking at providing new and more opportunities for students.* (Services Manager)

The electives were also highlighted as a positive development, for example:

*As an academic, this excites me more than any other aspect of curriculum reform, since it acts as a catalyst for both staff and students to broaden their horizons and perspectives, and, having been involved in the development of a number of these modules, it has been wonderful to see other staff members embrace the idea so enthusiastically, and the range of modules that will be available.* (Senior Lecturer)

Incentivising student performance

Although the assessment reforms have meant radical change for parts of the University, it has also affirmed existing good practice:

*...my staff now have more confidence in their pedagogy approach and assessment practices and are willing to make changes and suggest new initiatives.* (School Director of Academic Programmes)

The HEAR was mentioned positively by several colleagues:

*In launching the HEAR, the University has put employability firmly in the minds of students from first year onwards. An element of gamification is present in a student wanting to "complete" their HEAR, which has proven to motivate students in taking charge of what their record will look like by the end of their studies.* (Student Association)

Raising the status of teaching

The revised PG Cert HET has been viewed positively overall and has benefitted colleagues not just in Abertay but also in our partner colleges who have taken it, for example:

*As an associate lecturer on the revised PGcertHET course, from a college perspective the course has been an invaluable insight to teaching and learning within HE. [And] the course has helped build closer connections with the University and a better understanding of the objectives.* (Associate Lecturer, Fife College)
The University’s new CPD scheme has also received positive feedback from those who have taken part, but getting Universal buy-in and engagement is recognised as a future challenge. Staff who have taken part in the Going for Gold pilot:

... have found it to be a worthwhile experience and say it has been beneficial to reflect on their previous years as an academic ... There are others within the division who see little relevance in engaging in the T and L initiatives as research is seen as the only priority that will be really recognised. One of the future challenges will be to engage these staff and I would imagine that there are many others of this mind within the University. (Division Leader)

The process is rigorous and really quite tough, a real intellectual marathon, although having now successfully navigated my way through it, I feel a real sense of pride and achievement, and the TLE mentoring scheme and the online submission framework really did help support me. (Senior Lecturer)

Other aspects of raising the status of teaching have, however, been universally welcomed:

The arrival of ATLEF monies has been welcomed unequivocally with high volumes of applications subjected to a competitive selection process. These monies have allowed staff to develop and showcase innovations in teaching. (Head of School)

Finally, in terms of recognition for excellence in teaching, it is clear that the Student-Led Teaching Awards continue to be held in high regard:

In recognition of the amazing focus on TLE here at Abertay, we as a Student’s Association have made a commitment to recognise and celebrate truly outstanding practitioners through our Student-Led Teaching Awards ... The response we receive from students to nominate practitioners is always overwhelming and I feel that it is absolutely essential to illustrate that our students care about the quality of teaching they receive. (Student Association)

What motivates me most in my job are the interactions that I have with students, and the hope that I can share something of my infectious disciplinary enthusiasm with the creative and receptive young people who study with us. Being nominated for an award by them is the most profound and significant form of professional validation that I could wish for. (Senior Lecturer)

**Overall**

The TLE strategy has clearly impacted positively at the highest levels of the institution as illustrated by the following quotes:

The TLE Strategy, and the knowledge that this was informed by a period of extensive consultation within the University, provided a clear description of our aspirations and priorities for teaching and learning which we incorporated into the development of the new strategic plan. (Director of Strategic Planning)

What strikes me about our T&L Strategy is the completeness of it. It is large-scale change within a very small timescale, but a truly defining feature is not just the huge scope but, crucially, the integration of areas and the consideration of interconnectedness and consequences. (Vice Principal, Academic)

We are, however, conscious that although the implementation of the strategy is going to plan and the progress made is remarkable, there are continued challenges to ensure everyone, particularly grass roots staff and students, are well informed and onboard:

We have worked hard on communication of these changes and are continuing to do so, as well as ensuring we deal with unexpected issues as the new landscape beds in ... nevertheless, we believe it is inevitable [that there are] staff and students who are not totally confident of all the changes to our systems e.g. slightly confused with new procedures and processes. (School Director of Academic Programmes)
5. Concluding remarks

This case study has outlined the recent transformation of Abertay’s teaching and learning provision. Although the full impact of the reforms has yet to be determined, it is clear that there has been a step change in policy, practice and institutional culture; the new strategy and its development marks a different way of doing things for the University and although there are still challenges, these are not unique to Abertay. I have saved a final quote to end this account:

*Overall, what is most striking to me is the way that the strategy has influenced debate, and that this debate has been deep and scholarly – both in its substance, and in its tone – as befits a university with our values. This is an essential element of a strategy, which will deliver in the long term. Indeed, the presence of this type of debate is the strongest indicator of successful strategy in a university setting.* (Professor Nigel Seaton, Principal)
Appendix A: Detailed implementation timeline for TLE strategy

1. Reforming our curriculum

2013-14
- development of new Abertay Attributes to replace previous Graduate Attributes;
- curriculum for Excellence working group established.

2014-15
- development of an evaluation framework for portfolio review;
- systematic review of existing portfolio;
- development and quality approvals of a new suite of interdisciplinary electives (for students in stages 1 and 2);
- development and quality approvals of new curricula and degree programmes (for delivery in 2016-17).
- development of new academic structure.

2015-16
- introduction of new Abertay Attributes;
- implementation of new academic structure;
- delivery of seven undergraduate accelerated degrees;
- delivery of inter-disciplinary electives for stage 1 students only (initial suite of 11 modules for students to choose from);
- move from 15 to 20 credit module system for new postgraduate taught programmes;
- third-term teaching on undergraduate accelerated degrees.

2016-17
- delivery of new degree programmes;
- move from 15 to 20 credit modular system for all taught provision (undergraduate and postgraduate);
- delivery of full suite of interdisciplinary electives for stage 1 and stage 2 students.

2. Incentivising student performance

2013-14
- development of a new pedagogical-based academic calendar;
- development of a new assessment policy and literal grading scale;
- development of a new dual Grade Point Average/Honours classification for categorising degree awards;
- slight revision of academic regulations to account for assessment policy changes;
- initiation of Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) working group.

2014-15
- implementation of new academic calendar, including mid-term structured feedback weeks;
- implementation of new assessment policy, literal grading scale and revised academic regulations;
- academic regulations radically overhauled;
- full electronic submission of assessments by students (except examinations);
- first HEARs issued to all students graduating from July 2015.

2015-16
- new re-sit timetable implemented;
- full electronic marking and feedback on student assessments by staff (including examinations);
> implementation of new academic regulations.

3. Raising the status of teaching

2013-14

> supporting a strong institutional-wide community of practice (Network for Teaching and Learning Enhancement, NetTLE) with seminars, resources, web pages, social media (Yammer, Twitter);
> launch of a new Abertay Teaching and learning Enhancement Fund (ATLEF) to support innovation and development;
> supporting a group of senior staff to attain professional recognition through the Higher Education Academy (HEA), resulting in six SFHEA and 1FHEA;
> review of University’s PG Certificate in HE Teaching (PGCert HET).

2014-15

> round two of ATLEF launched, round 1 projects completed and disseminated;
> delivery of revised PGCert HET and internal quality approval of revised programme;
> development of a new staff-centred approach to CPD and submit for accreditation by the Higher Education Academy (HEA);
> pilot of new CPD scheme involving 23 staff;
> hosting of Abertay’s largest ever teaching and learning conference (150 people attended, October 2014);
> inclusion of national professional recognition in teaching and supporting learning as desirable in recruitment and selection of academic staff;
> target set in new University strategic plan. By 2020 we will: “Ensure all staff involved in teaching and supporting learning achieve appropriate national professional recognition.”
> ATLEF round three call announced focused on “Student Transitions”;
> development of a revised postgraduate taught portfolio.

2015-16

> new CPD scheme “Going for Gold” launched, accredited by the HEA;
> ATLEF 3 projects to commence.

As can be seen from the extent of reforms for Abertay’s taught provision is considerable and it is not possible to provide detailed commentary on all of these points. Instead, I will provide some summary narrative for each of the priorities and provide a slightly expanded account of two features of our new provision: inter-disciplinary electives and the new Abertay Attributes.
Appendix B: Portfolio review – decision-making framework for considering future Abertay’s portfolio

The framework below sets out a range of factors taken into account when considering which subjects should form part of the portfolio.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Aspects</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demand</td>
<td>&gt; Home students</td>
<td>&gt; Application trends, trends in SQA examinations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&gt; International</td>
<td>&gt; Application trends, market intelligence, information from (potential) international partners</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&gt; Employers/ industry/ public sector skills requirements</td>
<td>&gt; Information from employers already involved in programme design/delivery</td>
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<td>&gt; Intelligence from sector bodies, contacts …</td>
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<td>&gt; Labour market intelligence (SG, SDS, etc.)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&gt; Government</td>
<td>&gt; National priority areas</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt; Distinctiveness from competitor offering</td>
<td>&gt; Review of competitors portfolios</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>&gt; Cost of delivery and ability to generate surplus on programme</td>
<td>&gt; Programme and module costing (including costing of staff time and other resources)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Potential for postgraduate development</td>
<td>&gt; Subject area aligns with potential opportunities for PGT development</td>
<td>&gt; Evidence of demand for PGT (as above)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Potential for collaboration</td>
<td>Externally</td>
<td>&gt; Evidence of demand from (potential) partners (as above)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&gt; Potential for articulation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&gt; Potential for international collaboration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internally</td>
<td>&gt; Potential for interdisciplinary approaches</td>
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<tr>
<td>Link to research &amp; knowledge exchange</td>
<td>&gt; Alignment with areas of research strength</td>
<td>&gt; Alignment/contribution to research themes</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&gt; REF success</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fit with mission / purpose</td>
<td>Potential for knowledge exchange activity</td>
<td>Income from KE activities (CPD, consultancy, outreach as defined by SFC)</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other measures of KE success e.g. innovation vouchers, KTPs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt; Facilitates access or articulation</td>
<td>&gt; Trends, analysis of student population</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&gt; Promotes employability</td>
<td>&gt; Professional accreditation, work experience, employer engagement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&gt; Enhances our reputation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching and Learning</td>
<td>&gt; Quality</td>
<td>&gt; Student feedback (e.g. NSS, module evaluation)</td>
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<td>&gt; Quality reviews</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&gt; Professional recognition</td>
<td>&gt; National professional recognition (e.g. HEA, professional bodies)</td>
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<td>&gt; Student feedback data</td>
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<td>&gt; CPD</td>
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<td>&gt; External engagement (e.g. representation, networks, policy</td>
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<td>development)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&gt; Scholarship</td>
<td>&gt; Pedagogic research-papers published, research grants, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt; Student progression and retention</td>
<td>&gt; progression and retention data</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&gt; Entrance qualifications</td>
<td>&gt; Qualifications on entry data, comparison with UCAS benchmarks.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt; Student attainment</td>
<td>&gt; Module grades, degree classifications</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&gt; Student employment</td>
<td>&gt; DLHE</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: Abertay Attributes

**Intellectual**
Abertay will foster individuals to:

- master their subject, understand how it is evolving and how it interacts with other subjects;
- know-how knowledge is generated, processed and disseminated, and how problems are defined and solved;
- be able to critically evaluate information, and tackle uncertainty and information gaps with confidence and self-awareness.

**Professional**
Abertay will foster individuals to:

- be decision-makers and problem-solvers, tackling complex issues using creativity and considered judgement;
- be equipped and motivated to continue learning and professional development throughout their careers;
- be able to work both independently and collectively, understanding the values and responsibilities of playing a leadership and a team-member role as required.

**Personal**
Abertay will foster individuals to:

- be determined, ambitious, articulate and adaptable;
- be responsive and responsible in personal, cultural and social contexts;
- understand and embody self-awareness, honesty and integrity in their professional and personal lives.

**Active citizen**
Abertay will foster individuals to:

- deploy their skills and learning to make a real contribution to society locally, nationally and internationally;
- be inclusive, globally conscientious, socially respectful, and self-reflective;
- maintain and continuously develop awareness of their civic, ethical and environmental responsibilities.
Appendix D: Abertay University principles of assessment

Assessment and feedback practices, policies and procedures across the University should:

1. Improve student learning.
2. Motivate students towards higher achievement.
3. Recognise and reward achievement.
4. Reflect Abertay’s Graduate Attributes.
5. Be inclusive, equitable, consistent and appropriate.
6. Be fair to students and staff in terms of workload.
7. Be clearly understood by students and assessors.
8. Be progressive in terms of level.
9. Help to prepare students for life.
10. Reflect breadth and totality of student learning.
References

Abertay University, Internal student recruitment figures.


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