Identify, prioritise and evaluate: using an evidence-based approach to support an excellent student experience

Professor Karl Leydecker is Vice-Principal, Learning & Teaching, at the University of Dundee. He is also the Theme Leader for the current Scottish Enhancement Theme - Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience. The Theme was launched in October 2017 and will run through to 2020. In this lead article, Karl provides an insight into his thoughts on the Theme.

I have the great honour of being the Theme Leader for the current Scottish Enhancement Theme. When the topic of the new Theme was being discussed in the sector, there was an overwhelming consensus that it should try to help us all make sense of the new landscape of UK Higher Education where hardly a week goes by without a new data release. Examples in the last year or two include: the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) metric workbooks with complex benchmarking; longitudinal educational outcomes data which links student and tax records to reveal how students are doing in the workplace up to 10 years after graduation; and detailed UCAS entry data for each university on sex, area background and ethnic group. You can see Dundee's fascinating UCAS data here: https://bit.ly/2DV9aWv

These new data sources complement the more familiar datasets such as:
- the National Student Survey (NSS)
- retention and progression rates
- degree classification
- the Destination Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE) Survey, which provides data on the proportion of students in graduate employment or further study six months after graduation (itself about to morph into the Graduate Outcomes survey 15 months after graduation).

On top of all that, most universities are now either implementing or thinking about implementing learning analytics.

But how can we use all this new information to maximum effect? The scope of the Theme has been agreed by the sector as follows: What information is useful to help us identify and understand what we do well and what could be improved? This information, which includes qualitative and quantitative evidence, can be used to identify the issues that would benefit from intervention, help prioritise interventions for improving the student experience, and evaluate the effectiveness of those interventions including reporting on the ways in which the student experience has been improved.

The University of Dundee already has a strong track record of taking precisely this kind of evidence-based approach to enhancement, and elsewhere in this issue you’ll hear about our current and planned activities under this Theme. We are also actively involved in a range of collaborative clusters work. The clusters are looking at what constitutes appropriate evidence for the creative disciplines, involving DJCAD and led by Glasgow School of Art and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, and a learning analytics cluster being organised by Strathclyde University. Others are also emerging, including a cluster organised by the Open University in Scotland looking at employability, distance learning and belonging. See the Enhancement Themes website for more information on these.

Meanwhile, sector-wide activity is focusing on three areas:

1. Optimising the use of existing evidence, for example sharing current institutional approaches, supporting staff and students to use and interpret data, and identifying data that would enable the sector to better understand its strengths and challenges.

2. Student engagement, for example student engagement in learning and factors underlying the student voice, or using the Theme to consider concepts where there is no readily available data, such as student community, identity and belonging.

3. Student demographics, retention & attainment, including using learning analytics to support student success, and incorporating a focus on equalities.

There are therefore a large number of different areas for staff to contribute to our collective effort in the University and the Scottish sector to improve the student experience in an evidence-based way. As always we will be working in partnership with our students on this, both within the University and across the sector, listening to their views on what makes the biggest difference to their experience and their achievement.

www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/enhancement-themes/current-enhancement-theme
Since then, staff and students at the University of Dundee have been working together to identify ways of gathering and evaluating good evidence, and using it to sustain and enhance our University’s reputation for excellence. But what does it all mean for students and staff at our institution? Evidence is often misunderstood as just facts and figures that can be manipulated to support distinct agendas. Yet evidence is also at the heart of all academic inquiry. A biologist may find evidence in a living organism, while I may find it in a sonnet or a play. In both cases, it is the evaluation and analysis of the evidence that promotes knowledge and understanding, and that’s why Karl’s invitation for us to ‘think deeply’ is so appealing.

Thinking deeply on a large scale requires collaboration and co-ordination, and to get more staff and students involved, it’s best to start with a simple question: what are Enhancement Themes?

A quick look at the website [www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk) will tell you that they are selected by the Scottish higher education sector and supported by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland. They provide ‘a means for institutions, academic staff, support staff and students to work together in enhancing the learning experience,’ while they also ‘promote the collective development of new ideas and models for innovation in learning and teaching.’ With this in mind, we set up our institutional team, with the first task of identifying our key priorities for this Theme.

These goals are meant to encourage participation from all areas of the University, and we are very much open to ideas and suggestions on how to take them forward. We have funding available that can enable you to host a workshop, to set up and promote an event, or to get a small-scale project off the ground. All we ask is that you spend some time thinking about what evidence you might use for your activity, how you might involve the student voice, and how you might use that evidence.

How might you start thinking about a project? There’s no easy answer to that question, so all I can do is share my own guiding principle: take what you know best, and partner it with a great unknown! For example, if you have an interest in pedagogy but have never dipped a toe in social media, think about who could help you to use Twitter or Facebook for your project. If your passion is for facts and figures, find a painter or a story-teller who will translate them into another medium. If your strength is the written word, try using video instead to communicate your message.

The Theme runs for a further two academic years and we have a deadline of 14 May 2018 for submitting initial proposals for funding for projects. So, put on your thinking and innovating caps, and let us know how we can use evidence to enhance the student experience. I love the University of Dundee for the energy, ambition and creativity that it practises and inspires, and I have no doubt that exciting proposals will start popping up in my inbox.

Dr Aliki Varvogli, Institutional Team Lead  
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KEY PRIORITIES

1) to develop and implement a systematic approach to reviewing evidence on the entire student journey to encompass recruitment, retention, attainment and employability  
2) to support staff and student representatives so they can use data effectively  
3) to maximise our responsiveness to the student voice for the purposes of enhancement of student learning, teaching and the wider student experience.

Colleagues are invited to submit a proposal for seedcorn funding from the Enhancement Theme for a small scale learning & teaching development project. The focus of the project should align with the current Enhancement Theme and must involve a student contribution. If you would like to discuss your idea before submitting a proposal please contact Aliki. Submissions of initial proposals should reach her by 14 May 2018.  
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The ideas behind Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience has made the new Theme a lot easier for students to understand due to the simplicity of the name. It has been harder though for students to grasp exactly what areas are going to be worked on, as evidence could be used in pretty much all areas of the University for enhancement purposes. Like all quality processes it’s not something that most students particularly care about, and therefore new and creative ways to increase student awareness and engagement with the Theme are being considered by our institutional team. These include creating a comic strip and organising a play to communicate the work that has been going on.

We are also planning to use learning analytics as a form of evidence to help enhance several processes – the first of these is to review Turnitin data to look at assessment planning. This will of course require the use of student data, and therefore the communication of why and how we are using this data is key at this stage. In order to get students to understand how their data is being used, a transparent approach has been adopted, which will ensure students are informed every step of the way about how and what data will be used. Key examples of changes that could be made as a result of data analysis are being highlighted in all communications, which are distributed via email and the School Presidents to ensure that the message is received by all students. We’ll continue to gauge student opinions in years two and three of the Theme, when more projects have been completed or are well underway.

Ellen Brooks, Vice President of Academia, DUSA

The conference keynotes are Dr George Siemens, Professor and Executive Director of the Learning Innovation and Networked Knowledge Research Lab at University of Texas, Arlington and Dr Camille Kandiko Howson, Academic Head of Student Engagement, King’s College, London.

George Siemens researches technology, networks, analytics, and openness in education. He was a pioneer in the development of MOOCs, is a founding President of the Society for Learning Analytics Research, and has advised government agencies worldwide, as well as numerous international universities, on digital learning.

Dr Siemens’ keynote will take a research-informed, evaluative approach to current trends in education. He will consider the evidence that currently exists to support new models of learning in relation to learning and technology; some of which already have a strong evidence base, while others are still being explored.

Camille Kandiko Howson is involved in national higher education policy research on students and the student experience; working on Learning Gain research; student surveys, including NSS and UKES; student engagement and student expectations; and academic motivation, prestige and gender.

Full conference information is available here: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/conference

The Annual Conference: Are we using the right evidence to bring about change and genuinely improve the student experience?

The 15th Enhancement Themes conference will explore this topic on Thursday 7 June 2018 at Glasgow Caledonian University. The event will showcase work from the current Theme and aims to provide inspiration around the use of evidence to evaluate the student experience and enhance student success. Join University of Dundee colleagues, Ruth O’Riordan and Linda O’Neill, who will be presenting at the event, to learn more about taking a creative and qualitative approach to using evidence.

There are 4 conference tracks:

- Navigating the data landscape
- Using qualitative and quantitative approaches to enhance student retention, attainment and employability
- Finding effective evidence for prompting student engagement in their learning
- Evaluating improvements in the student experience

Do you have an idea for a project or teaching intervention that takes a creative approach to using evidence to enhance the student learning experience? The call is now open for Dundee’s Institutional Enhancement Theme funding.

The conference starts at 9:00 am, with a drinks reception at 18:00 – 18:30 at the Royal College. Please also ensure you don’t miss the networking sessions over breakfast and lunch.

One of the ways in which you can help spread the word about the Enhancement Theme with your students is to get them involved in a funded project or teaching intervention. See page 2 for further details on the call for projects!

If you haven’t been successful in booking a free funded place – and the places went very quickly! – don’t register for a paid place as a waiting list is in operation and it is anticipated that additional funded places will become available nearer to the conference date. Email etadmin@qaa.ac.uk to be added to the waiting list.

Please also remember that if you do have a funded place, and you are no longer able to attend the event, you must cancel your place by 10th May. A charge for the delegate fee plus a £30 administration fee will be made for non-cancellation.
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DIGITAL DUNDEE

EVIDENCE AND WHERE TO GET IT: FOCUS ON STUDENT DATA DASHBOARDS

Evidence comes in all shapes and sizes. For example, we have evidence of excellence in all the nominations for teaching awards that we receive. We have mid-semester feedback and end of module feedback questionnaires. Student representation structures such as Student-Staff Liaison Committees or the Student Representative Council (SRC) help us to gather and debate evidence at School and University level. What might be less known is that we also have a wealth of data that can help us to understand who we are, what we do well, and where we could benefit from further enhancement. At the click of a button or three, we can find out how many first class degrees we awarded last year, how many students from a particular ethnic background are studying with us, or whether the students who withdrew from our courses share any characteristics such as age or gender. To find out more, log on to My Dundee and look for Learning and Teaching Information. Under L&T Data, you’ll find our amazing Student Data Dashboards. If your screen suddenly fills up with numbers and numbers are not your thing, please don’t be put off. The Dashboards have been designed for maximum user-friendliness, and you’re only a click or two away from learning all kinds of interesting things about our students. My advice is simple: always think of the people behind the data. Who are the students who do well and love their time at University? Who are the ones who took a painful decision to leave? Can we try to find out why some had to repeat a year? Data can enlighten, empower and inspire us. Let’s use it to enhance our student experience.

Dr Aliki Varvogli, Institutional Team Lead

What’s your current role?
I am the Associate Dean for Learning and Teaching in the School of Humanities, and I lead the ‘Evidence for Enhancement’ Theme for the University of Dundee. Both roles focus on promoting and delivering excellence in the broad area of teaching and learning. That’s something that our University does well, so in many ways mine is an easy job to do!

What did you do before?
I have been at Dundee since 2001, and before I took on my current roles I taught and researched contemporary American literature. I still do those things, but on a smaller scale. Since arriving at Dundee I have published three books on American fiction, and I’ve got the pleasure of teaching some of my favourite authors: Paul Auster, Philip Roth, Annie Proulx, Dinaw Mengestu, Chang-rae Lee, Jhumpa Lahiri, and many, many others. I also have a passion for crime fiction, so as soon as I arrived at Dundee I set up a module that included all my favourite crime writers.

What current task would you like to highlight?
The Evidence for Enhancement institutional team is busy promoting the Theme and encouraging staff and students to get involved. My task is to explain the Theme and help others imagine how they can make a contribution to it. Since the Theme applies to all Scottish Universities, I also travel to meetings that bring all institutions together. My task there is to share best practice, help develop new ideas and initiatives around the Theme, and represent our institution. Meeting colleagues and students from other Universities is one of the best parts of my role.

What do you see as the longer term goals of your job?
Working to enhance the student experience will always be at the heart of what I do, as I think it is at the heart of what all my colleagues do. My recent work has taken me outside the immediate context of my School and my discipline, and building up on work that I do at the national level is something that I look forward to.

Tell us something we wouldn’t guess about you…
Four years ago I bought a house without even bothering to view the garden, but since then I’ve developed a passion for gardening!