

# The First Year Experience from a Scottish Perspective: The State, the Sector and the Students

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In 2006/8 the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the quality arm of the Scottish Funding Council, instituted a sector-wide initiative to focus attention on the first year experience. This took the form of a First Year Enhancement Theme with some £300k of funding over that period. The work was carried out by a steering committee, which scoped the issues, commissioned 10 research projects, established a network of institutional contacts for the first year, and disseminated findings via conferences and research reports.

The Scottish QAA approach is distinctive in emphasising enhancement rather than audit as the basis of quality assurance, and in developing a way of working with the sector via broad, rolling themes and institutional initiatives, in addition to a programme of periodic institutional reviews, and the use of large-scale student surveys such as the National Student Survey (NSS). Arguably the Scottish experience can provide a new slant on national initiatives on the first year to compare with the models in the rest of the UK, Europe, Australia and the USA.

This keynote will briefly outline some of the critical features of the QAA experience:

- The state agenda of promoting a 'Smart Successful Scotland' through education and lifelong learning,
- The sectoral politics of diverse institutions and tensions between enhancement and accountability philosophies of educational development.
- The steering committee's commitment to challenge traditional deficit models of the first year experience and champion research-based accounts of how best to engage and empower students in learning and personal development.

This scene setting will provide a jumping off point for a more detailed consideration of the student voice based on the findings of qualitative research to discover student expectations and experiences of first year. That in turn will lead to a consideration of student views on the key terms engagement and empowerment, and their views on how these constructs are experienced, and might be enhanced in first year. This phase of the keynote will include opportunities for colleagues to participate and hopefully draw some comparisons between the Scottish findings and Australian perspectives on the first year.

The keynote will conclude by summarising some of the lessons learned from this major initiative and discussing the implications for our views on universities, the first year, quality, curriculum development and the student experience of higher education in the 21st century.