Collaborative Enhancement: Benefits and reflections from across the UK

Event summary

QAA Cymru was delighted to host a lively webinar on 21 May 2024 to share experiences of collaborative enhancement working across the UK. The webinar formed a part of a Higher Education Funding Council of Wales (HEFCW) funded QAA project, exploring collaborative enhancement; the benefits and challenges of collaborative working, including consideration of any issues working across UK borders; and the relationships between college and university partners in tertiary projects.

Webinar panel

Our expert panel, chaired by QAA Cymru's resident Quality Assurance and Engagement Manager, David Gale, comprised:

- Sam Elkington, Professor of Learning and Teaching, Teesside University; Sam led the [Assessment Design Attributes](#) project partnering with higher education institutions (HEIs) in England and University Alliance

- Luke Millard, Dean of Teaching and Learning, Abertay University; Luke leads the collaborative cluster project [Personalised Approaches to Resilience and Community](#) (PARC), working with a range of HEIs in Scotland and England

- Jo Owen, Higher Education Manager, Grŵp Llandrillo Menai; Jo partnered with Bangor University in the [Student Engagement in Learning](#) project

- Steph Tindall, Head of Organisational Development, University of Wales Trinity Saint David; Steph leads the ongoing [Immersive Learning Network](#) project which brings together all higher and further education institutions in Wales.

Each of our panellists have been, or are currently, engaged in collaborative engagement projects that have been, or are, supported by QAA either though funding provided by HEFCW, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) or QAA directly through its membership activities.

While [QAA formally defines](#) enhancement as 'the process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported', differing interpretations include making things better or even better than they already are, and improvements to teaching and learning or an aspect of the student experience with an element of risk - because the outcome of enhancement projects cannot always be known at their onset.

During the webinar, we explored a range of benefits and challenges in working collaboratively and all were in agreement that, while there are some challenges, these can

be minimised through flexibility in project design and project management.

Challenges

Some key challenges that were highlighted for project participants to be aware of are:

- Meeting planning - consider early scheduling of project meetings as finding times for numerous participants to meet can be one of the most difficult issues in collaborative projects.

- Data sharing - if you need to share data between institutions, arrange for a data sharing agreement at an early stage, if it is not already in place.

- Language - be aware of language and, for projects with Welsh participants, the Welsh Language Standards. Meetings may need to be bilingual, although this is not always necessary, but all publicly facing outputs will require publishing in Welsh and English so build in time and budget for translating.

- Nation differences - consider other nation differences such as levels: Level 4 in England is equivalent to Level 6 in Scotland, for example. These can be easily overcome by agreeing commonality of language early within a project.

Benefits

There was recognition that working with partners adds value to any project, helping to co-construct project aims and plans, even where there is fluidity and plans evolve and develop throughout the project.

Working in the tertiary space enabled colleagues to better understand student perspectives and even in the college sector where smaller HE student populations are common, compared to universities, staff were able to gain a better understanding of well-known student views and recognise the similarities expressed by university students, as well as differences. This enhanced shared understanding of the higher education providers was seen as a benefit for both college and university project participants.

Working with students within projects, including the active use of student researchers as project partners, can ensure the student voice is inherent within projects and not an adjunct to staff-led activities and findings.

Throughout the conversation it was clear that **working with** others is better than without them. Project partners:

- support each other
- provide/share resources, where possible, to partners who have limited access
- combine intellectual capacity - creating a force for enhancement
- bring a range of skills that can augment the skillset of the project team as a whole
- share enthusiasm to work and learn together.

Top tips

Finally, each panellist was asked for their top tips for successful collaborative working; here are a few of them.

➢ Be prepared to be surprised - this may be by the findings, the additional participants who want to join your project or the sheer enthusiasm of the project team.

➢ Make sure it's fun! Often the funding only pays for key expenditure such as student researcher contracts and partners will be undertaking their contributions in their own time - so ensure it's worth their time by making meetings and discussions enjoyable.

➢ Don't be a control freak - be prepared to be flexible and adapt as necessary as the project progresses.

➢ Trust your partners to get the job done. People come on board with a project because they are enthusiastic about the topic - work with that and enjoy their and your enthusiasm.

➢ Strategic priorities - where a project aligns with institutions' strategic priorities, it is easier to get buy-in from senior colleagues in terms of resources and staff time. Consider your institutions' priorities and senior colleagues who can support and champion your project internally.

➢ Maintain a pragmatic outlook - the project should be a learning process so be open to learning new ways of doing things, new ideas and alternative ways of collaborating.

➢ Relationship building - you may end up with a lifelong friend or the collaborator for your next peer-reviewed paper, so make room for relationship building; consider reducing agendas and ensuring time for discussion.

➢ Attend your networks and keep on talking about your priorities and areas for development - that will help others identify you as a potential collaborator when your interests align.

Collaborative Enhancement Projects

To find out more about the wide range of Collaborative Enhancement Projects supported by QAA, visit the following web pages:

- Enhancement in Wales: Our work in Wales (qaa.ac.uk)

- Enhancement in Scotland: Enhancement Themes

- QAA Membership funded Collaborative Enhancement Projects: Collaborative Enhancement Projects (qaa.ac.uk)