Resilient Learning Communities

End of Year 3 Report for: Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh

Table 1: Evidencing effectiveness and reporting impact						
Cumulative descriptor of institutional /cluster/Student-Led Project activity over RLC Theme period	**Which overarching RLC Theme questions (1-5) were prioritised?**	Evidence of effectiveness in addressing chosen RLC theme priorities	Suggested outcomes and impact measures used to assess effectiveness (refer to Theory of Change model **Appendix 1**)	Challenges	Made most difference?	Hindsight
Institutional **Main Project:** **'Lonely Learning & Learning to be Lonely' research project**: Activity spanned Years 1 to 3, and was divided into Phase 1 and 2 Focus: Identifying	Who are our current and future students and how will they want to learn? How can we gain a clear understanding of their needs? What information do we need to enable us to best support	The main research project produced a number of outputs which were effective in achieving key objectives: - Raise awareness of the experience of loneliness and isolation - Enhance understanding of the means by which these can be managed - Develop resources to mitigate loneliness and isolation where they are felt to be detrimental to the individual	**Evidence of difference** was achieved by raising awareness of Loneliness and Social Isolation amongst staff and students and signposting to relevant support through: • Project Briefing Document output for staff and students • High levels of engagement with staff and student	The size of our institution and associated staff capacity to fully engage with the RLC project (this has been relevant for RLC committee members and the wider QMU community) Year 3 research activities (Phase 2) would have	The focus on doing one major project well was a major strength of this work, and we would aim to replicate this in future. The development of the QMU Student Experience Strategy (SES) in parallel with RLC Enhancement Themes project was extremely beneficial,	The length of time available for Phase 2 of the research project was extremely challenging (due to associated external funding restrictions). Further reflection and work will be required to relate the project findings to different groups of QMU students (e.g.

key issues around loneliness and isolation, raising awareness, and signposting students and staff to available resources The core of our institutional project comprised a robust mixed methods research project, which using a psychosocial and analytical approach. Results from Phase 1 of this project then informed the iterative development of three additional related projects during Years 2 and 3 (see pages 4-8 of this document) Related reports for Phase 1 and 2 are included as Appendices:	their learning? How can we capitalise as a sector on the attributes students bring? How do we ensure we are able to support our diverse learning communities? What might this mean for our staff and our infrastructure?	Key recommendations and conclusions from this project included the following: **Phase 1** • Encourage student interaction in groups of varying size to build community and sense of belonging in the cohort/ programme and in the university overall • Raise awareness amongst students and staff of what to expect/provide in terms of Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) support and its importance • Consider ways to build community online and how to encourage all students to engage • Reflect on how feeling part of a community affects the student experience • Highlight the importance of opportunities for informal interaction for students and staff • Build awareness of transition points across the student journey (including 'non-traditional' journeys, as well as transition points between years of study etc.) • Involve and inform peers (e.g. class reps) in welcoming/ supporting students who enter as Direct Entrants • Emphasise that support services are not there only for students when "something bad has already happened" • Clarify processes of support from	questionnaires and focus groups during Phase 1 of the project • New approaches to signposting support by PATs, for example, inclusion within longitudinal briefing activities, and embedding hyperlinks within PAT's e-mail signatures **Evidence of scale, quality and experience** was achieved through the design and delivery of the research project by a team of colleagues with relevant subject expertise and experience. This spanned the three years of the RLC institutional project and resulted in a number of high quality outputs, including two peer reviewed publications (under review) and four conference and poster presentations **Evidence of partnership and engagement** achieved through the co-created approaches adopted through collaboration between the RLC	benefitted from a longer time frame, however, this was dictated by the external research funding from the SFC and UKRI Talent and Research Stabilisation fund which funded additional time for our Research Assistants, This stipulated an extremely short window for the funding to spent. Engaging students with research activities was crucial, but the team faced challenges around aligning these with the academic year and students placements etc. The Dissemination Phase during Year 3 was also impact by staff capacity to coordinate and engage with events and initiatives, and we have therefore planned a series of dissemination events during the academic year 2023-24, starting with an institution wide event	with several team members being members of both working groups. This led to strategic alignment between the two projects, resulting in the inclusion of key findings from the main RLC research project helping to inform the themes within the SES (e.g. Learner Journey and Healthy Universities) We were delighted with the positive overall engagement with the RLC project from both students and staff. Taking time to reflect on findings around Loneliness and Isolation from Years 1 and 2 was very beneficial as it enabled the project to develop in an iterative manner, and facilitated links with parallel institutional priorities and initiatives which aligned with emerging and contemporary challenges.	Doctoral students, students at UK and TNE partner institutions). This is also a potential limitation if QAAS wish to use the report to inform developments more broadly across the sector.

		PAT onwards • Recognise student resilience and capability to build community • Celebrate the advantage we have as a small one-campus institution to build community and inclusion **Phase 2**: • The study highlights the importance of a relational approach in providing support for students in relation to loneliness and social isolation, suggesting that more investment and training of PATs and a better resourced (human) student support service is desirable • The term and notion of resilience is not neutral but nuanced and loaded; Conversations with university students about resilience requires sensitivity and an awareness of varying perceptions of what it refers to and/or implies • Community-building initiatives should be valued and promoted • There are documented risks related to loneliness and social isolation but the findings indicate that many students recognise and activate a range of coping strategies when the situation demands this.	project team, QMU Students Union, and other QMU colleagues (from both academic and professional services team). Phase 2 of the Research project embedded a Students as Partners approach in which newly appointed Student Champions received training in designing and delivering focus groups and gaining ethics approval, leading to upskilling and capacity building for the future amongst our student body. Other students were also recruited to create video resources to capture approaches to coping with Loneliness and Social Isolation, and to curate a future webpage to showcase outputs from the RLC project	for staff and students on Wed 1st November 2023.	For example, our Loneliness and Isolation project had identified the importance of community, and we strategically aligned this with support for the emerging Cost of Living crisis in Year 3 by designing and launching the Thank Goodness It's Thursday (TGIT) initiative (see pages 4-5)	

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Institutional **Related Project 1:** **Thank Goodness It's Thursday (TGIT) initiative** Year 3 activity (Nov 22 to Apr 23) Focus: Community building (to address Loneliness and Isolation) in parallel with Cost of Living Support for QMU students Format: Weekly events for students on campus which offered free hot meals, take home meal packs, and a themed social activity	How do we ensure we are able to support our diverse learning communities? What might this mean for our staff and our infrastructure? How should we anticipate, influence and respond to the changing external environment? How can we engage with our stakeholders and ensure we are influencing strategy and policy both in Scotland and beyond?	This additional Year 3 project was initiated in response to the emerging Cost of Living Crisis and associated impact on Loneliness and Isolation for our students and other stakeholders. The design of the TGIT initiative was informed by findings from Phase 1 of the RLC Research Project which included: - Importance of a relational approach in providing support for students in relation to loneliness and social isolation, - Community-building initiatives should be valued and promoted	The TGIT initiative aimed to build a strong community, and support QMU students during a cost-of-living crisis. Outcomes and impact measures for the TGIT initiative are shown in **bold italics** below, with associated evidence of impact collated under these: ***1) Alleviates some of the cost-of-living pressures through provision of free food and heating.*** • Since launching in November 2022, TGIT has comprised 24 weekly events, each of which have brought between 200-250 students together in a warm, safe and welcoming space • ~5600 hot meals were served and ~2100 meal kits were given out to students. ***2) Community building results in lower levels of loneliness and isolation among the student body.*** Feedback from student participants has been overwhelmingly positive, with a small selection of illustrative comments included below. *'What's working well with TGIT evenings from your perspective?':* "It's very welcoming" "The sense of community😊" "The concept is great, the event itself creates a sense of community…" "Bringing people together"	Securing adequate numbers of staff volunteers to support TGIT events on a weekly basis (to serve food and lead social events). Some related tensions when timings of these events overlapped with industrial action.	The co-created, collaborative approach, and strength of alignment between the TGIT initiative and other institutional initiatives (e.g. widening participation) to support QMU students. Strong strategic support by the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) with SLT sponsorship by our University Secretary. Following a successful pilot period, this secured a significant financial commitment of £11,000 from the institution to fund the TGIT initiative. Energy and personal	Significant resource input required in terms of volunteer staff to serve hot food and coordinate social activities for each event. This may make it challenging to maintain the TGIT initiative as a weekly event in 2023-24, so we are actively exploring alternative options for this (e.g. fortnightly events, social events led by student societies etc) Huge commitment and administrative load on the leader of project – needs to be considered and supported in order to roll out future events.

| | | We were able to support our diverse learning communities by adopting a co-created approach involving collaboration between the RLC Project team, the QMU Students' Union, QMU Student Support Team, the QMU Senior Leadership Team Sponsor, and our catering provider Baxter Storey. | "The sociable environment and the concept of the take home bags"

"Good food which helps me to save money & ensure I get a cooked meal. Also good opportunities to socialise with friends"

"It's a great community, good food, good turnout"

Do you have any other comments you'd like to add?

"Thanks for this. I wouldn't be able to cope without these nights"

"…i'd just like to point out that given the cost of living crisis/housing crisis we're experiencing at the moment, this initiative is just really nice and warms my heart. so thank you!!"

"Thank you so much for providing this. Really means a lot this year x"

3) QMU is seen to be a supportive institution.
Positive feedback received from our QMU students, with comments including *"I feel so grateful to be a part of such a great uni".*

We are also extremely proud that the TGIT initiative has been recognised in the following sector level awards during 2022-23:

• Winner of the Herald Higher Education Awards 2023 (Student Welfare Category).

• Shortlisted in forthcoming College and University Business Officers (CUBO) Awards 2023 (Innovation in Student Experience) .

• Shortlisted for the What Uni? 2023 Awards (Special submission: Cost of Living Response) | | commitment from leader of the TGIT initiative (Dr Kat Lord-Watson), plus commitment from multiple staff volunteers each week.

Flexibility and willingness to collaborate on this initiative from our external catering company (Baxter Storey). | |

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Institutional **Related Project 2:** **Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) Project** Year 2 and 3 activity Focus: Enhance and formalise training for Personal Academic Tutors (PATs) to promote signposting to key support services	How do we ensure we are able to support our diverse learning communities? What might this mean for our staff and our infrastructure?	This PAT project emerged both from the development of the Student Experience Strategy and the main RLC project findings around the importance of signposting students to support services, and the key role that PATs play in this. The project approach was catalysed by attendance at a QAA Scotland 'Focus on Professional Services' event by a QMU cross-institutional team of five (staff and students). This led to the following: • Training and Induction events for new and existing PATS • Establishing a PAT working group • Designing and delivering a PAT survey • Pilotting an electronic system to log PAT meetings	Successfully embedding this PAT project within the Student Experience Strategy Delivery plan. Attendance at PAT Training and Induction events by 74 new and existing PATS (three iterations of a half day event). Establishment of a cross-institutional PAT working group which has already undertaken the following work: - Designed and delivered a PAT survey. This elicited 37 valuable responses that have informed a paper for the Student Experience Committee (SEC) – see below. - In the process of pilotting an electronic system for logging PAT meetings - Submitted a paper to the QMU SEC that contains nine recommendations for further enhancement of the PAT system, all of which have been accepted by SEC.	Identification of new PATs was limited by GDPR related issues. These are now being looked into further.	Embedding the PAT project in the Student Experience Strategy (Learner Journey strand). Attendance at the 'Focus On' event by a cross-institutional team of staff and students. This catalysed a positive, co-created approach to the project.	Closer alignment with the ongoing Learner Journey Maps project (being undertaken by the Student Champions) would be beneficial, however, to date, timings of the parallel projects have precluded this.

Cumulative descriptor of institutional /cluster/Student-Led Project activity over RLC Theme period	Which overarching RLC Theme questions (1-5) were prioritised?	Evidence of effectiveness in addressing chosen RLC theme priorities	Suggested outcomes and impact measures used to assess effectiveness (refer to Theory of Change model Appendix 1)	Challenges	Made most difference?	Hindsight
Institutional **Related Project 3:** **Student Champions: Learner Journey Maps Project** Year 3 activity Focus: Embed student voice and co-created approaches to understanding and supporting learner journeys for different cohorts of QMU students Student partners have designed and delivered a project to co-created QMU Learner Journey maps through a Students as Partners approach. Student Champions have also engaged in four projects that are directly linked with the QMU Student Experience Strategy: • Inclusive Learning,	Who are our current and future students and how will they want to learn? How can we gain a clear understanding of their needs? What information do we need to enable us to best support their learning?	12 Student Champions were successfully recruited to these paid part-time roles in two cohorts • Sep 22, n=4 • Jan 23, n=8 The cohorts includes a range of lived experiences across different learner journeys. The September cohort of four Student Champions developed Learner Journey maps for students at QMU, and then designed and delivered a range of activities to refine and develop these further for different entry routes to QMU. Members of the RLC Research team upskilled the entire Student Champion cohort in focus group design and delivery. This has developed valuable research skills amongst the Student Champion cohort, thus building a	Co-created QMU Learner Journey maps have now been developed through a Students as Partners approach. They have already helped us to identify: 'Who are our current and future students and how will they want to learn? How can we gain a clear understanding of their needs? What information do we need to enable us to best support their learning? The maps have also already informed the work of a number of QMU groups and committees, including the Transition and Induction Working Group, Student Experience Committee, and Programme Leaders network. Final versions of the Learner Journey maps will refined over the summer to also signpost available support services, and they will then be distributed to new QMU students as well as staff, including PATs. This initiative has also led to empowerment of the Student Champions. For	Significant resource has been required to manage this project (including coordinating monthly timesheets and payments etc).	Embedding the student voice and a Student Partnership approach into a variety of projects linked to the QMU Student Experience Strategy. Empowering Student Champions to take full ownership of their work and associated decision making. The Student Champions skills, enthusiasm and ability to work highly effectively as a team should also be celebrated.	Recruit/re-recruit Student Champions at the start of the academic year in order to ensure adequate time for full induction before engaging them in projects. The project would have benefitted from dedicated administrative support.

Teaching and Assessment Champions cohort • Module Descriptor working group • Lecture Capture working group • Sustainability committee		sustainable model for delivery of future student-led focus groups The Student Champions initiative has been extremely successful, and is receiving positive anecdotal feedback from across the staff and student body at QMU. We plan to continue the Student Champions model into the next academic year	example, they wrote and submitted their own abstract for the European First Year Experience international conference. This was accepted and the Student Champions gave an excellent oral presentation at conference in June 2023, thus acting as ambassadors for both QMU and Students as Partners approaches, whilst also developing their own experience and employability prospects. They have also presented their work to Scottish HE Developers (SHED) network sector meeting, plus various internal QMU committees and groups. They have also submitted an application to the forthcoming sparqs awards.			

When considering information provided in Table 1:

- **What is the ONE most positive aspect to report over the 3 year period? (Evidence of effectiveness column and Suggested outcomes and impact column)**
- Adopting a robust research based approach built around one major project. This has resulted in multiple outputs and findings which have already led to three related and highly successful projects conducted during Years 2 and 3 (and detailed in this report). Project findings have also identified a core common theme around the importance of 'Building Community', and this strand of work is being further developed with staff and students across QMU on an ongoing basis.

- **What is the most challenging issue? (Challenges column)**
- Whilst the relatively small size of our institution offers a number of advantages, in the context of this project it also results in staff members often holding multiple roles/responsibilities which can lead to challenges around available staff capacity to engage with the Enhancement Themes projects (both for RLC project members and the wider QMU community)

- **What has made the most difference and why? (Made most difference column)**
- Embedding a robust, research-based approach at the core of the project, and then drawing from the findings of this work in an iterative, evidence-informed manner to 1) engage staff and students with the project and 2) develop related projects and initiatives in the latter phases of the project which align with other institutional strategies and priorities.

- **What would you NOT do again, in hindsight and why? (Hindsight column)**
- Embed an additional Phase 2 of the research project with significant time constraints (due to external funding limitations)

	Table 2: Ways of working/engaging in the Resilient Learning Communities Themes work				
Theme process	**Activities' description**	**Positive aspects/difference made**	**Challenges**	**Changes made during process**	**Hindsight - could be improved by:**
Supporting staff and students to engage with Theme activity	A skilled Research team leading the core research project. Collaborative committee approach adopted by the RLC project team Parallel development of the QMU Student Experience Strategy (SES), and overlap of individuals on the SES committee and RLC project team Regular reports to the Student Experience Committee (SEC) and School Academic Boards (SAB) Partnership with the Students' Union and launch of the QMU Student Champions initiative Iteratively adapting the project in response to both project findings and emerging priorities,	Designed and led an impactful research project which resulted in a number of scholarly and peer reviewed outputs, and the findings of which catalysed a number of related projects during Years 2 and 3 (PAT project, TGIT initiative, Student Champions). Alignment of the SES with RLC project findings, for example, the importance of understanding different Learner Journeys in order to signpost relevant support to tackle Loneliness and Isolation. Helped to raise awareness and disseminate findings via SEC/SAB members and their representative roles. Embedding a Students as Partners approach throughout RLC work and wider projects linked to Student Experience Strategy delivery For example aligning the original focus on Loneliness and Isolation with the emerging Cost of Living crisis, and then designing and delivering a highly impactful TGIT initiative that we plan to continue into the next academic year.	Student recruitment for Phase 2 of the Research Project in terms of alignment with the Academic calendar and student availability.	Adapted approach to focus on upskilling Student Champions to build research capacity for the future.	An earlier start and thus longer timeframe for Research Project Phase 2. Dedicated administrative support to coordinate research focus groups and Student Champions initiative.

Effectiveness of organisational and management structures	Theme Lead changed half way through project (Nov 21), and Administrative Support changed (June 22)	Associated break in continuity, although the former Theme Lead (Deputy Principal) remained on the RLC project team and supported it throughout. Support and direct involvement in RLC project team by senior staff, including the Deputy Principal, a Head of Division, Assistant Secretary, Director of Academic Development, and our Students' Union President	COVID implications resulted in moving from a fully online to a hybrid meeting structure. Theme Lead and Administrative support for project had limited time to dedicate to the RLC project (as this project was running in parallel with the establishment from scratch of a new Centre) Varying engagement and capacity to contribute from committee members, with associated turnover of committee members throughout the three year period of the project.	Use of intranet to share project updates not sustained throughout project due to change in staff, as well as perceived reduction in staff engagement with intranet (as result of hybrid working and associated access issues when off campus)	Single agreed and easy to access location for sharing project resources (suitable for hybrid access by all QMU staff and students).
Evaluating activity and projects	Engagement with associated Enhancement Theme events and resources were found to be extremely helpful	Very useful to coordinate evaluation activities through one nominated colleague in the RLC project team.	Embedding evaluation approach retrospectively, as a robust evaluation approach was obviously not embedded within any of the sector RLC projects when they started in 2020.	During Year 2 of the project one colleague was nominated to lead our project evaluation work.	Embedding robust evaluation and theory of change approaches from the start of future projects.
Disseminating outcomes and findings internally and externally	Enhancement Themes conferences Staff bulletin on Loneliness and Isolation Peer reviewed publications Infographics TGIT – collaboration with Students' Union and QMU Communications/Marketing team to raise awareness via socials channels,	Collaboration with Students' Union (SU) and Senior Leadership Team – communications via SU channels as well as QMU Comms/Marketing team Support from Comms/Marketing team for entering various competitions – led to being shortlisted for three sector level awards, and winner of the Herald Higher Education Awards 2023	Capacity for holistic evaluation approaches is an ongoing challenge in a small institution. Maintaining intranet site. Staff availability to support TGIT will be a challenge in terms of maintaining initiatives into 2023-24	Moving dissemination timeline into academic year 23-24 in order to ensure capacity available to organise events, as well as availability of staff and students to present	Identify alternative routes for disseminating info – move away from intranet to newsletter/ webpage

				and engage with (attend) event	
	followed by excellent buy in and word of mouth spread by student attendees Regular reports to the Student Experience Committee (SEC) and School Academic Boards (SAB) To note: Future dissemination events are planned for academic year 2023-24, with the initial event for students and staff scheduled for November 1st 2023.	Helped to raise awareness and disseminate findings via SEC/SAB members and their representative roles.			
Collaborating with other institutions/other organisations	Multiple QMU staff and students attended Enhancement Themes conferences. A cross-institutional team of five students and colleagues attended the Focus on Prof Services event (during Year 2). Colleagues also attended events relating to the following elements of the RLC theme: Microcredentials collaborative cluster Anti-Racist Curriculum project	Stimulated conversations amongst individuals Attendance at the Focus On event informed plans for our PAT project Helped to inform thinking around ongoing micro-credentials and EDI in the curriculum work	Challenging due to staff capacity We were also only institution to focus specifically on Loneliness and Isolation, so opportunities for cross-institutional collaboration were less obvious	Not applicable	Could consider increased focus on cross institutional collaboration during future projects

Which ONE process from each of those listed within the Theme processes column in Table 2 worked best? (Activities description and Positive aspects columns)

A skilled Research team leading the core research project which resulted in a robust approach and quality scholarly outputs,

Why was it the best? (Positive aspects/difference made column)

It led to the opportunity to iteratively develop subsequent areas of RLC project focus informed by the research findings, and to also align with the parallel development of institutional strategy (in the form of the Student Experience Strategy)

Which was most difficult and why? (Challenges column)

Staff capacity (as we're a relatively small institution) and cross-institutional collaboration (as we were the only institution specifically focussing on Loneliness and Isolation)

Why did you make any changes? (Could be reported as Positive or via Challenges column)

To adapt to immediate and emerging institutional priorities in order to support our students with the Cost of Living crisis

We achieved this by iteratively adapting the project in response to both project findings and emerging priorities, for example aligning the original focus on Loneliness and Isolation with the emerging Cost of Living crisis, and then designing and delivering a highly impactful TGIT initiative that we plan to continue into the next academic year in order to focus on building Community.

What would you NOT do again, in hindsight and why? (Hindsight column)

Launch multiple parallel strands of work /projects in Year 3. As a small institution with limited staff capacity we could have benefitted from sourcing dedicated project management support during Year 3.

Report Author:	**QMU RLC Project Team** **(collated by RLC Project Lead, Prof Catriona Bell)**
Date:	**30th June 2023**

Appendices:

Research Project Phase 1 report:
'Lonely Learning & Learning to be Lonely': A study of Student resilience and challenge during the COVID-19 lockdown

Research Project Phase 2 report:
'Lonely Learning and Learning to be Lonely': (Phase 2) Student Resilience

TGIT Evaluation report:
Thank Goodness it's Thursday (TGIT) initiative