FOCUS ON: GRADUATE SKILLS

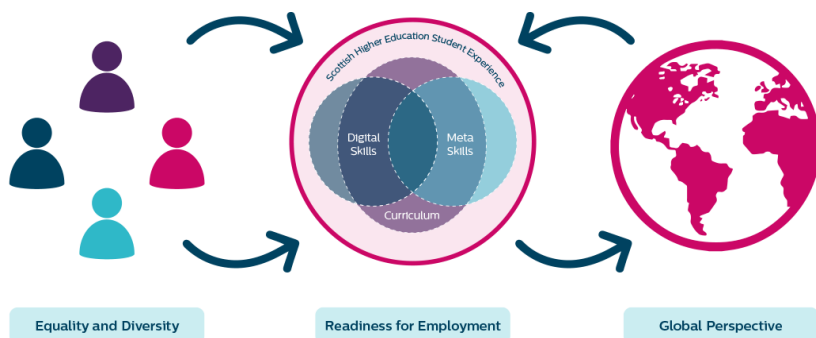## Student views research project

What is Focus On?

QAA Scotland's Focus On projects help the sector address recommendations and commendations from Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR). Focus On ties these outcomes to developmental activities, resources and events that the whole sector can get involved in. Projects last one academic year (from October to June). We try to focus on the most practical things that can help colleagues make a real difference in a short space of time.

Why graduate skills?

With debate on apprenticeships and skills high on the agenda in higher education, Focus On: Graduate Skills is relevant and timely. This project builds on our previous work, including the Graduates for the 21st Century Enhancement Theme.

We identified topics relating to graduate skills in ELIR) Outcome Reports and in our Thematic Report on Employability and Graduate Attributes. We then consulted Scottish higher education institutions and students' associations to identify priority areas. As a result, the project will consider:

- Readiness for Employment: how can we most effectively embed skills inside and outside the curriculum, including digital skills, for graduates from all disciplines?

- Equality and Diversity: how can we support students from all backgrounds and characteristics to develop skills that will help them to secure and sustain success in the workplace?

- Global Perspective: how do we ensure that all Scottish graduates are enabled to live and work in a global society, and that the Scottish sector is informed by global developments?

Students' views on graduate skills: A research project

The aim of this project is to analyse the views of current students on the skills they are developing through their studies at higher education institutions in Scotland, addressing the following questions:

- What do current students think their institution is doing well, and where could it do better?

- What digital skills do current students feel they are developing through their studies, and are there differences in these views across different disciplines and subject areas?

- Do current students feel that their institution ensures that all students (irrespective of background and different characteristics) are able to access the full range of skills development opportunities offered in higher education?

- Are current students confident that they are developing the skills required to live and work in a global society?

We anticipated that this project will give the Scottish higher education sector:

- a better understanding of the views of current students on the skills they are developing through their studies at higher education institutions in Scotland

- up-to-date examples of good practice; insights into gaps in provision and areas for development

- current intelligence that will provoke debate and inform discussion.

How will the project engage with students and collect data?

Online survey: Data collected from six institutions representing ancient institutions, new and post–92 institutions. Approximately 30 respondents per institution with a target of 180 respondents in total.

Focus groups: A sub–sample of the survey respondents from each institution will be asked to take part in a focus group, with 6 participants in each focus group (a target of 36 participants in total). Each focus group will represent student views at a different institution, and individual focus groups will be comprised of students from one institution to allow discussion of their views within the context of their own university.

A mixed design will be used in the quantitative questionnaire – with a correlational design for the analysis of relationships between variables of interest (e.g. development of digital skills and access to opportunities). A between groups design will analyse differences in variables of interest between different institutions and subject disciplines.

The qualitative data collection will use a realist approach and a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The project team

Dr Maxine Swingler (Project Lead) is a lecturer in the School of Psychology and a member of the BPS Scottish Branch committee. She is interested in graduate attributes, employability, assessment and feedback and student well-being.

Scott Kirby is Vice-President of Student Activities in the University of Glasgow Students' Representative Council, and oversees clubs and societies, volunteering and extra-curricular activities.

Dr Maria Gardani is a lecturer and disability co-ordinator in the School of Psychology. She has a strong interest in sleep and student mental health and is currently investigating the mental health of PGRs.

Dr Archie Roy is a Careers Manager at the University of Glasgow, has research degrees in Psychology and Education, is a qualified guidance professional (SQA) and psychometric test user (BPS and EFPA).

Anna Rolinska is lecturer in English for Academic Study (University of Glasgow and Glasgow School of Art) and works with international students. She is interested in the relationship between digital technologies and graduate attributes/employability skills.

Student researchers

Grigorios Kokkinidis (3rd Year Psychology)

Katerina Manoli (MSc Research Methods of Psychological Sciences)

Anoushka Kapoor (3rd Year Psychology)

The team's experience

The project team have experience in undertaking this type of research from the Graduate Attributes project described earlier. They evaluated the short reflection activities and discipline-specific careers workshops and alumni events through questionnaires and focus groups. They developed a self-efficacy measure based on the University of Glasgow Graduate Attributes Matrix and investigated whether the reflection activities impacted upon student self-efficacy, and analysed the data using appropriate statistical techniques. They investigated student feedback and the student perspective on Graduate attributes for pre-honours students using open ended questions and focus groups. The quantitative and qualitative findings have been presented to discipline specific and multi-disciplinary audiences at national conferences.

The team are also experienced in presenting qualitative data in an engaging format is also demonstrated by the final outcome of the project-creation of data base of case studies and videos which embed employability and GAs in teaching. Co-author Anna Rolinska created a template in which to collect and disseminate case studies and which offer a short description of the teaching intervention, analyses of its gains and losses, and recommendations of what can be done differently and how the activity can be adapted to suit other disciplinary contexts.

The project lead is an experienced teacher of qualitative research methods, and with co-author Dr Maria Gardani has experience of supervising qualitative research projects in psychology and use of focus groups and interviews for gathering data on the student experience. They can contribute experience of analysing data using a thematic approach, grounded theory and IPA (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Smith, 2015) and have worked in partnership with students to publish their research (Johnstone, Swingler & Reid, 2017; Hatton and Gardani, 2018).

Co-author Dr Archie Roy has experience in devising questionnaires and devising and running focus groups. He currently runs a student group to critique and advise on the content and format of the annual University of Glasgow Careers Guide. He has also run focus groups for a range of disability and higher education projects. Similarly, Scott Kirby also has experience running questionnaires and focus groups from a student-to-student perspective, as he has been involved in previous LTDF projects and through his role as a sabbatical officer on the Students' Representatives Council, which functions primarily to feedback student views through the council to the main senior committees in the University.

For more information on this project visit
www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/focus-on
or contact QAA Scotland (**ARCadmin@qaa.ac.uk**)