Learning and Teaching Strategy 2015 – 2020

(approved by Senate on 1 October 2015)

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1.0   Vision

"Our vision is of a learning culture that places teaching at the centre of what we do. Our learning and teaching shapes and is shaped by our research rich environment. Our motivated, vibrant, diverse community of learners and teachers to work in partnership to develop independent, skilled and highly valued graduates with the confidence to make positive change in society"

2.0   Our Ambition

Focused on Enhancement: We ensure a world-class student learning experience though a commitment to enhancement. We review, reflect on and develop our teaching practice, processes and facilities to engage our students in innovative, relevant and challenging curricula. Central to this is partnership working with our diverse learning community to understand their needs and to provide them with flexibility in what, how, when and where they learn.

Fostering Critical Thought and Investigative learning: We put the fundamental relationship between teaching and cutting-edge research at the heart of our transformational learning experience.   We embed research methodologies in our curricula to support our students to be investigative, reflective learners with the confidence to contribute independent and critical thought leadership. Our students are resourceful and responsible subject specialists with the ability to adapt to, and communicate effectively within, a collaborative multi-disciplinary environment. Our graduates will be ethically and socially aware.

Inclusive, Promoting Access and Opportunity: Our learning and teaching community is a diverse group of individuals from a broad geographical and socio-economic background, who enter the University on the basis of aptitude and potential. We nurture their talent, supporting them to thrive and achieve success in and beyond our learning environment .

A Supportive Environment: We are supported by virtual and physical infrastructure of the highest quality. We promote ethical and social awareness to engender positive behaviours free from discrimination, harassment and unfair treatment. We develop, support and encourage our staff, who in partnership with our students, create a learning experience and student support and engagement culture that is sector leading, and we recognise this through fit-for-purpose promotions and reward processes.

3.0 Strategic Objectives

The strategic objectives build upon and recognise progress against those in the 2011-2015 strategy and are consistent with the objectives set out in the University E-Learning strategy. They align to the key themes of Empowering People, Agility and Focus that underlie the University Strategy and are set out in the following sections.

Theme 1: Empowering People

We will empower our community to actively invest their talent and expertise in our world-class Learning and Teaching environment.

We will enable this through:

Recognition and Reward of Teaching
Promotion and reward criteria in relation to teaching will be more closely aligned to expectations of roles and supported by consistent advice, mentoring and effective Performance and Development Review processes. The profile of Teaching will be such that it achieves parity of esteem in our research-intensive environment.

Innovative approaches to teaching, assessment and the support of student learning will be appropriately recognised in workload models to encourage innovation. We will continue to recognise outstanding contributions through our Teaching Excellence and Student Led Teaching Awards.

Development and Professional Recognition of Staff
We will support professional teaching and administrative staff development through more effective Continual Professional Development (CPD), not only in the early years, but also for staff in the later stages of their careers. Recent adoption of the UK Professional Standards framework by the University provides the opportunity to provide structured CPD supported pathways to higher levels of professional recognition of teaching.

Improved Administrative Support of Teaching and the Student Experience
There are significant variations in the effectiveness of the administrative support of teaching and the student experience across the University. We will deliver a supportive, collaborative environment for our staff and students, through increased clarity and consistency of roles and professional support structures aligned to effective systems.

Deeper Student Engagement
Central to our vision is an academic community of staff and students but current feedback suggests that students do not always feel part of this community. In seeking to address this we will build on our strong partnership with students across all aspects of learning and teaching. We will develop this partnership further by working more closely with the student body further by working more closely with the Students' Representative Council (SRC) on policy development and engaging students more actively in the co-creation and evaluation of the learning experience.

Theme 2: Agility

We have experienced an unprecedented period of change over the last ten years as the use of technology becomes more pervasive in personal and formal learning spaces. This increases the opportunity for innovation in our approach to teaching but, in turn, places considerable demand on physical infrastructure and student support systems. Our world-class Learning and Teaching Environment will be characterised by robust and agile approaches to both the delivery and support of teaching.

We will enable this through:

Improved Teaching and Information support systems
There is a sense that current course and programme documents and approvals processes are overly bureaucratic, complex and take too long to complete. This is potentially stifling curricular innovation. We will ensure our approvals processes are straightforward and responsive.

There is also a disconnect between our student information and academic support systems, processes and the people that are aligned to them. As our student community becomes more diverse and expectations grow in a highly competitive global learning environment, we will create a higher degree of agility in our student services and support mechanisms while ensuring processes are efficient and effective.

Effective IT and the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)
In support of our E-Learning strategy, our IT infrastructure will be developed to a level of robustness and fitness for purpose that enables future technology-supported innovation while seamlessly supporting current teaching practices.

As staff engage more creatively with learning technologies, they are increasingly being frustrated by the constraints and capabilities of our current VLE. We will empower our staff to fully exploit the opportunities afforded by the digital learning space, by evolving our VLE to provide greater local flexibility and the capability to support an enhanced range of modes of teaching and learning.

Innovative and Appropriate Pedagogy
We will explore a range of teaching methods and plan for future needs. We will adapt to the digital landscape while embracing effective alternative forms of conventional teaching and assessment. We will enable staff and support them with an agile policy and incentive framework. Evidence-based, impactful enhancement and innovation will be appropriately recognised and rewarded.

Developing Physical Infrastructure
Current timetable constraints and room availability are having significantly negative effects on the learning environment. In addition, we lack spaces that that have the flexibility to support various forms of teaching and assessment and study spaces that facilitate collaborative learning. We will create additional capacity to alleviate current timetabling pressures and develop flexible teaching and learning spaces that will support both conventional and emerging approaches to teaching and collaborative learning.

Theme 3: Focus

Within any learning environment there are specific challenges associated with the range and diversity of provision. Some of these impact on administrative complexity, quality of provision and student choice whilst others affect the ability of students to achieve success within the environment. Well-structured academic provision will lie at the heart of out world-class Learning and Teaching environment.

We will enable this through:

Curricular Innovation
We celebrate the breadth of the general curriculum in Scotland but current curricular structures and teaching methods create physical constraints that often limit student choice and reduce the flexibility to evolve programmes. They also tend to mitigate towards large numbers of courses, some of which may have very small student numbers, that are administratively and academically resource intensive. In addition, the extent of true interdisciplinary learning and cross-cultural interaction at undergraduate level is limited. Going forward, we will create real flexibility for our students and staff through review and revision of our undergraduate degree pathways to enhance quality, breadth and, where appropriate, depth.

At postgraduate level the expansion of taught degree provision has left a legacy of some programmes that are sub-optimally structured and that have limited appeal to students. We will review postgraduate degree portfolios regularly to ensure that what is offered is of high quality and attractive to students.

In recent years, we have had a particular focus on assessment and feedback. There is a growing recognition of the significance of assessment strategies in shaping student learning. Refinement of these strategies can facilitate more structured and impactful feedback leading to more effective achievement of intended learning outcomes and lighter loads on staff and students. We will, therefore, build on the progress we have already made by continuing to develop and promote more effective approaches to assessment and feedback.

Embedding Graduate Attributes and Employability
We have gone some way towards effectively embedding skills development and employability within our general curricula. We have learned that, with careful design of learning experiences and assessment structures, this does not have to be at the cost of the academic integrity of our courses. At the same time, we have been raising awareness amongst the student body of the importance of the skills development and reflection on their experiences both inside the curriculum and more widely. With academic and professional staff working together to support student development, and good engagement from the student bodies on campus, we will continue this work to ensure that students graduating from this university have sector-leading employability skills. Beyond graduation, we will retain a strong connection with our alumni, drawing on their growing experience to help guide our approach to Attribute development and engaging them as ambassadors and mentors who support the broader student experience.

Supporting Transitions

Our current focus on retention and success is primarily around supporting the transition from secondary to tertiary education. In fact, students enter the University from a wide range of backgrounds and countries and with a range of academic and English language ability. All students undergo transitions as they enter the University learning environment and as they progress through the different levels of, and modes of, study. The retention and success of these students is heavily influenced by the way in which we support these transitions and integration. We will make further improvements in the retention and the success of our students by making effective, evidence-based interventions and providing the appropriate infrastructure to support a broader range of student transitions into an integrated environment than we currently target.

Internationalisation of the Curriculum

In synergy with the University Internationalisation strategy we recognise and respond to the fact that we are preparing our home students for the globally-connected workplace whilst supporting an increasingly international student body. This brings challenges and opportunities not only for staff but also for our students themselves. We will internationalise our curricula, ensuring that they are globally relevant and contain learning experiences that are culturally accessible to all, while giving students the benefits of the distinctive features of a UK research-enriched learning environment. We will ensure that our curricular structures, partnership strategies and the associated administrative systems encourage and support opportunities for accredited mobility for all our students. Underpinning these will be well-supported English and foreign language skills development resources, enabling our students to embrace the full spectrum of international opportunity available to them.

We will also bring the benefits of our engagement in Transnational Education (TNE) to all of our staff and students. We will learn from our peers, engaged in the leadership of TNE, and will work with our partners in TNE to enhance the international experience for all students.