

Discovering STEP

Activity, impact and learning related to the current cycle of Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme

April 2026



STEP

Scotland's Tertiary
Enhancement Programme

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Introduction

This report is intended to bring staff and students up to date with the activity, impact and learning related to the current cycle of STEP (Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme). It covers:

- What STEP is;
- How STEP operates within Scotland's tertiary sector, bringing together colleges and universities through collaborative project work over a four-year programme;
- How impact is being evaluated and what this looks like after the first eighteen months of the programme;
- How communication and dissemination and partnership are working;
- How the STEP team has responded to sector feedback, addressing challenges involved in delivering an effective tertiary enhancement programme.

What is STEP?

STEP (Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme) is the national enhancement programme for the Scottish tertiary sector. It is designed to enable Scotland's colleges and universities to work together to improve and enhance learning, teaching, the student experience, and staff development across tertiary provision.

STEP is one of the delivery mechanisms of [Scotland's Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework \(TQEF\)](#) and is underpinned by the TQEF principles. At the heart of the programme are projects that will produce outcomes and outputs of value to the entire tertiary sector.

STEP runs on a four-year cycle (figure 1) that moves through three distinct phases – Discovery, Implementation, and Reflection – during which projects are designed, delivered, and evaluated. The programme is sector-owned and managed jointly by [The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education \(QAA\)](#) and [College Development Network \(CDN\)](#).

Figure 1: The STEP four-year cycle



The topic of the first STEP cycle is **Supporting Diverse Learner Journeys**. There are four priority areas relating to this topic:

- Supporting transitions and navigating pathways;
- Strengthening engagement, community and belonging;
- Developing skills and capabilities for learning;
- Delivering tailored, targeted and personalised support.

What has happened so far?

During the Discovery phase, seven projects were successfully established through an iterative process, with institutional staff and students coming together in a series of in-person days and online sessions. This approach provided a basis for exchange of ideas and finding common ground over topics of mutual interest. Two additional projects were funded through a competitive bidding process. Each project team submitted a detailed proposal, which was approved by the STEP Steering Group.

Our nine current STEP projects are:

- Appreciating Belonging and Enabling Change: From Strategy to Practice
- Language Accessibility Promise
- Pathways to Personal Support: a Collaborative Model for Tailored Guidance for STEM Students Across the Tertiary System
- Regional Enhancement and Collaboration in Tertiary Scotland (REACTS)
- Strategies to Support Student Engagement and Partnership Within an Increasingly Time-Poor and Cash-Poor Student Population

- Supporting Access, Progression and Successful Outcomes in Disabled Student Communities (SAPSO)
- Supporting Neurodivergent Students with Professional Dialogue in Work-Based Learning Settings
- Transforming Assessment Policy and Practice in Scotland (TAPPS)
- Understanding the Staff Development Landscape Required to Support Diverse Learner Journeys in the Tertiary Sector

The projects vary from one to three years in duration. Each project has a lead and co-lead institution (one university and one college) and a mix of collaborative and consultative partners. Students are actively involved in all projects.

In-person and online sessions

Institutional staff and student representatives (as members of the STEP Network and additional members of the project teams) have worked together in a series of in-person events and online sessions. During the Discovery phase, the focus of these events was on working up areas of mutual interest into project proposals. Latterly, the in-person events have helped teams to progress their project activities. The online sessions have focused on delivering continuing professional development activity featuring topics such as managing risk, ethics, and communication.

How are we measuring impact?

The sector is using a Theory of Change model to measure impact. The causal logic underpinning the Theory of Change for STEP is detailed below.

1. Can STEP evidence that the ownership of, and engagement in, each cycle by staff and students within institutions and across the Scottish sector creates **an infrastructure to enable collaboration and sharing of good practice?** (Short term outcomes)
2. Can STEP evidence that collaboration and sharing across the sector leads to **enhancements of behaviours** for institutions, the sector, staff and students? (Medium-term outcomes)
3. Can STEP evidence that changing behaviours of institutions, the sector, staff and students leads to **improved student learning experiences and outcomes?** (Long-term outcomes)

The Theory of Change model identifies ten short-term outcomes. Evidence in support of these outcomes is collated from STEP institutional reporting and other regular reports submitted by institutions to QAA Scotland. The ten short-term outcomes and evidence summary are presented in table 1. This evidence, plus the key achievement data in figure 2, show how activity is fulfilling the first question in the causal logic chain. As STEP progresses, it is anticipated that the evidence will continue to show how activity fulfils the first question, as well as questions 2 and 3. Even at this early stage, some institutions are citing evidence of longer-term impact (see figure 4).

Table 1: STEP Short term outcomes and summaries of evidence

Short-term Outcomes	Summary of evidence
S1: The STEP topic is owned and promoted across the Scottish HE sector	Every institution (n43) has participated across the programme of STEP Discovery Days and Navigation sessions. Each institution has engaged with both staff and students using a variety of communication and dissemination methods to update its community on the STEP initiative. QAA and CDN inform the sector of ongoing progress through the publication of Bulletins after each in-person meeting and through email communications to STEP Network members.
S2: The sector is committed to a programme of work for the first STEP cycle	Seven project proposals emerged from the collaborative Discovery Days and Navigation Sessions. A further two emerged from a competitive bidding process. Every institution is involved in at least one project either as a lead, co-lead, or partner.
S3: Students in representative roles in Scottish institutions become aware of, and some engage, in STEP activities	40 institutions have student members on the STEP Network. Eight students have been joint authors of end of year 1 institutional reports. Nine institutions employed students as interns or consultants to further their STEP aims. Another two institutions are employing interns in the second year. The Language Accessibility Promise is a student-led project. STEP is included in sparqs' That's Quality event, a training programme for senior student representatives. 87 student representatives from across Scotland's tertiary sector undertook this training programme in 2024-25, and 104 in session 2025-26.
S4: Student Network members engage in STEP events	All in-person meetings of the STEP Network have been attended by student members, with 18-25 student representatives at each event (out of 43 institutions). Students are also represented on the STEP Steering Group and the Topic Leadership Group. Across all meetings for both Groups over 2024-25, there was at

	least one student present, except for the first meeting of the Steering Group when Student and Topic Leads were selected and approved. Institutional end of year reports showed that 38 students across 43 institutions participated in STEP activity during the first year.
S5: Staff in the Scottish institutions become aware of, and some engage, in STEP activities	Institutional end-of-year reports showed that 110 staff across 43 institutions participated in STEP activity during the first year. In addition to representative roles on the three STEP governance groups, several institutions have nominated staff to champion/lead their institutional STEP engagement.
S6: Staff Network members engage in STEP events	35 institutions had staff attending at least three of the four in-person meetings of the STEP Network in the first year. Across the four meetings, attendance was as follows: from 43 institutions there were 45, 39, 34 and 40 staff attendances.
S7: Institutions align their internal activities to the STEP Topic	Evidence from institutional end-of-year reports (2024-25) demonstrate that institutions are aligning their enhancement activities, priorities and strategy with the current STEP topic. This is detailed in 25 institutional reports. Some examples of practice include: • embedding STEP within a Curriculum Transformation project; • reviewing and updating quality policy; • embedding STEP into strategic planning and operational processes; • integrating STEP themes into student support services.
S8: Colleges and universities start to work together on shared challenges	All projects have a mix of colleges and university partners. The smallest project includes just two partners engaged in a regional collaboration, while the largest project includes 17 institutions from across the nation.
S9: Increased knowledge about the STEP topic amongst student reps	STEP has raised the profile of the topic with students, particularly with Student Topic Leads, institutional members of the STEP Network, and those who have been

	involved as student interns/consultants working on STEP projects in their own institutions.
S10: Increased knowledge about the STEP topic amongst college and university staff	Ten institutions report that awareness and understanding of STEP is increasing. Examples given by institutions are: • events aimed at increasing STEP awareness have shown strong interest and demand; • STEP is influencing thinking, fostering cross-departmental dialogue, and laying the groundwork for future development; • increased awareness of the importance of belonging through conversations around STEP; • STEP conversations with a wide range of faculty and professional services staff have led to a shared recognition of areas within the institution that may benefit from internal review or enhancement. There were 16,258 views of the STEP website from December 2024 to February 2026.

What are the key achievements?

Participation and engagement

All 43 Scottish institutions have engaged in STEP according to their contexts and priorities. Figure 2 summarises key quantitative information around staff and student engagement with STEP.

Figure 2: Staff and student engagement in year 1 of STEP



Dissemination and communication

Throughout the first year, institutions focused on disseminating and communicating information about STEP to begin engaging staff and students. This resulted in institutions identifying the best ways to organise internal governance structures to support dissemination and communication and other specific project activity. Institutions adopted different approaches to suit their own circumstances and priorities.

Typically, student and staff engagement with STEP has been through existing governance structures. Seventeen institutions have established STEP working groups that feed into existing governance arrangements. Beyond dissemination and communication through these governance structures, institutions have used various approaches to reach out to the wider staff and student community. In addition, some institutions have developed specific projects aligned within institutional priorities to involve staff and students.

While governance structures have played an important role in dissemination and communication, STEP activity is communicated through a variety of other methods (see figure 3).

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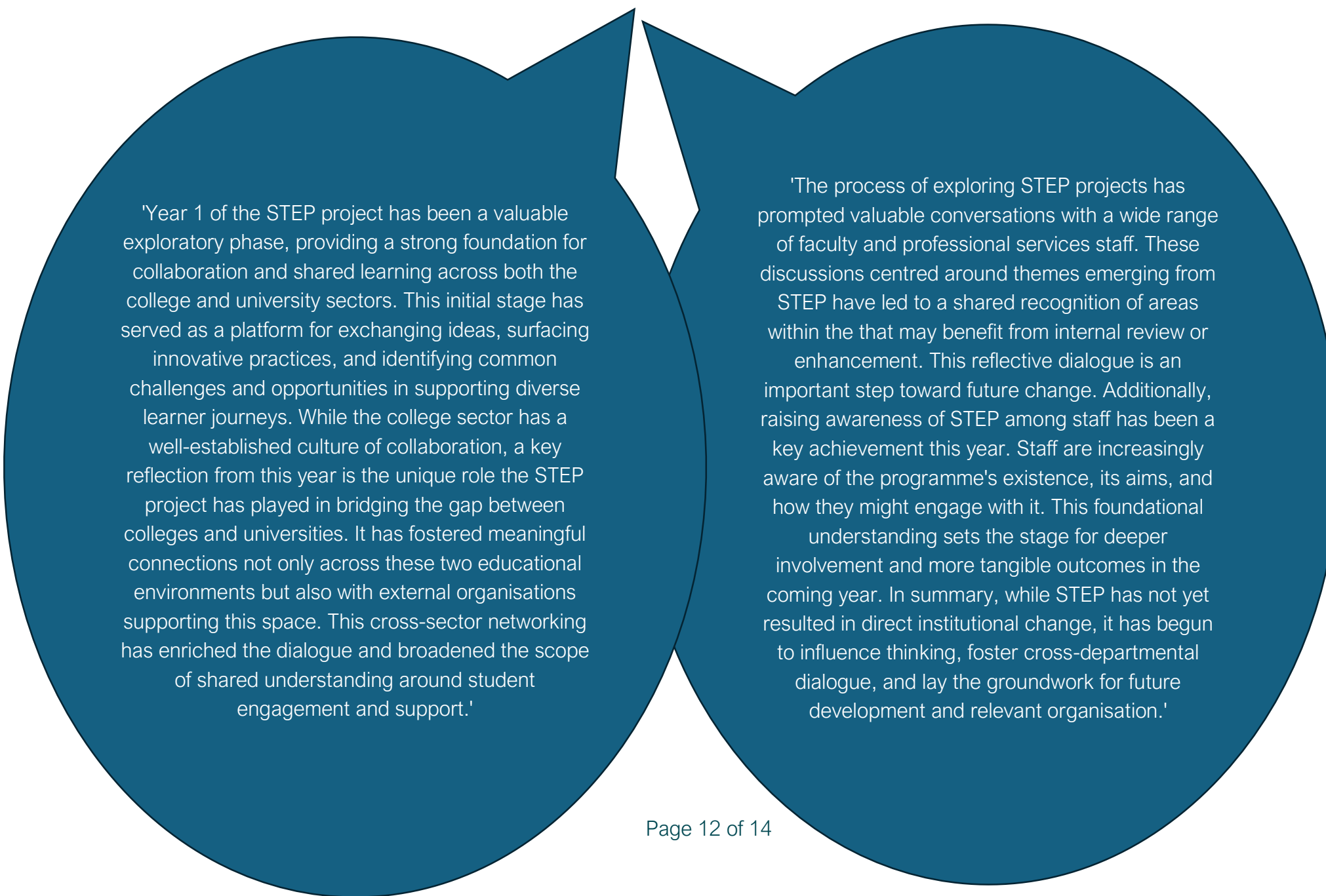
Figure 4: Quotes from institutions about STEP impact

'In year one, the foundations have been laid to ensure the University's participation in STEP will contribute to institutional priorities over the next three years. In particular, the University's approach to assessment within its Curriculum Transformation Project will be informed by participation in the TAPPS project.'

STEP 'has catalysed tangible shifts across the institution this year, many of which are reflected in our new Academic Strategy (2025–2028): Curriculum Planning and Flexibility - influenced by STEP's focus on diverse learner pathways, we will expand our high-flex and blended delivery options and enhanced stackable and micro-credential offerings. This allows us to better support learner transitions and personalise pathways into and through further and higher education.'

'Raising awareness of STEP and its associated projects has helped create a connected and informed network not only internally but also externally with other FE/HE institutions.'

'Tangible examples are now emerging that demonstrate how effective practices are being shared across institutions. These examples extend beyond the formal boundaries of the STEP project itself, indicating a growing culture of openness and collaboration that is likely to have lasting impact.'

The image features two large, overlapping blue circles. The left circle contains a paragraph of text, and the right circle contains another paragraph. The circles overlap in the center, creating a white triangular shape. The text is white and centered within each circle.

'Year 1 of the STEP project has been a valuable exploratory phase, providing a strong foundation for collaboration and shared learning across both the college and university sectors. This initial stage has served as a platform for exchanging ideas, surfacing innovative practices, and identifying common challenges and opportunities in supporting diverse learner journeys. While the college sector has a well-established culture of collaboration, a key reflection from this year is the unique role the STEP project has played in bridging the gap between colleges and universities. It has fostered meaningful connections not only across these two educational environments but also with external organisations supporting this space. This cross-sector networking has enriched the dialogue and broadened the scope of shared understanding around student engagement and support.'

'The process of exploring STEP projects has prompted valuable conversations with a wide range of faculty and professional services staff. These discussions centred around themes emerging from STEP have led to a shared recognition of areas within the that may benefit from internal review or enhancement. This reflective dialogue is an important step toward future change. Additionally, raising awareness of STEP among staff has been a key achievement this year. Staff are increasingly aware of the programme's existence, its aims, and how they might engage with it. This foundational understanding sets the stage for deeper involvement and more tangible outcomes in the coming year. In summary, while STEP has not yet resulted in direct institutional change, it has begun to influence thinking, foster cross-departmental dialogue, and lay the groundwork for future development and relevant organisation.'

Student engagement and partnership

Institutions across Scotland are undertaking a wide range of activities to engage staff and students with STEP. Beyond dissemination and communication through governance structures, institutions have used various approaches to reach out to the wider staff and student community. Institutions use various incentives - including catering, payments, vouchers, authorised class absences, and workload planning - to encourage staff and student participation. Some students have taken on formal consultative roles, and staff gain recognition through professional development and review processes. Positive feedback loops further enhance engagement. Most institutions focus on sharing information about STEP through governance structures and tailored activities while running local projects aligned with the programme. Some examples of local STEP-aligned projects include:

- A co-created project exploring the experiences of care-experienced students, using mixed research methods to generate insights and recommendations for more inclusive learning environments;
- Research into the needs of mature students, including interviews and journey mapping, with an output of a Journey Map to support both students and staff;
- A student-led belonging survey prompting strategic discussions about inclusive practice;
- Digital storytelling of learning journeys and focus groups capturing student experiences for team self-evaluation.

How are we responding to institutional feedback?

In their 2024-25 end-of-year reports, we asked institutions to tell us about challenges they experienced during the first year of STEP delivery. Some actions we have taken in response to feedback are:

- ☑ Clarifying Network Members' roles by publishing the STEP Network Members Guide and additional guidance as required;
- ☑ Streamlining our communication approach by monitoring the timing, volume and content of communications;
- ☑ Facilitating engagement at STEP events by moving in-person events to different days of the week and designating a specific purpose or topic for each of the in-person and online meetings;
- ☑ Increasing collaboration by building more time for activities into the in-person meetings of the STEP Network, including protected time for groups working on their projects;
- ☑ Supporting engagement of STEP Network student members by remunerating attendance at the in-person meetings using a voucher scheme;

- ☑ Supporting student partnership through publication of the guide *STEP Network Student Members: Selection, Handover and Support*, which contains guidance for institutions and students' associations about the selection of STEP Network Student Members, handover from one to another, and the support on offer for students in this role;
- ☑ Keeping funding arrangements under review to achieve the right balance between collaborative projects and institutional enhancement.

Conclusion and the future of STEP

Overall, institutions found the approach to the first year of STEP delivery and the topic of Supporting Diverse Learner Journeys beneficial. One institution reported,

'...the approach to STEP very clearly provided an opportune vehicle for bringing together universities, colleges and sector agencies around a strong theme for enhancement. We recognise that by the end of the first year of activity, we are on a journey as a tertiary sector and the Discovery Days and Navigation Sessions set the scene for this and aided the building of a 'tertiary enhancement community.'

Future plans show institutions are focused on both building the infrastructure that supports STEP activity (governance, engagement, communication, evaluation) and exploring topics that strategically align with their priorities, such as assessment and trauma-informed practice. With several projects concluding at the end of year two, there is scope to develop new projects across the sector.

What can I do now?

To keep up to date with STEP developments, visit the [STEP website](#) and sign up to our mailing list.

