



STEP

Scotland's Tertiary
Enhancement Programme

Understanding and Supporting Student Transitions in Scotland

STEP (Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme) is the new 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. The programme is sector-owned and jointly managed by the [Quality Assurance Agency \(QAA\)](#) and [College Development Network \(CDN\)](#).

If you would like to know more about STEP, we encourage you to visit the STEP [website](#) – step.ac.uk – and sign up to our [mailing list](#).

On 29 May 2025, QAA and CDN were delighted to welcome staff and students from across Scotland to Dundee for the first open event under the STEP banner.

How students navigate their journeys through tertiary education has been a point of much discussion and is set to remain an important topic as the world continues to change. In the summer of 2024, three pilot STEP projects were launched on various aspects of the topic. Our event **Understanding and Supporting Student Transitions in Scotland** provided an opportunity for staff and students to hear updates about these projects, as well as engaging with two inspiring speakers from outside Scotland. There was much food for thought across the day.

While many attendees were STEP Network members who had also attended the Discovery Day, we were delighted to welcome colleagues from beyond the Network, hosting 73 attendees in total.

A whole institutional approach



The day started with a keynote presentation from Dr Michelle (Shell) Morgan, Dean of Students at the University of East London, titled **The importance of developing a whole institutional integrated approach to improve the experience, progression, retention and success of our students and staff**. Key points Shell raised included:

- When student personal support decreases, academic performance suffers.
- Both students and staff need to be supported to bring about student

success. The Course Leader is a pivotal figure in the co-ordination of student support. Looked after staff equals looked after students.

- Academic and social integration are both important to instilling a sense of belonging, and realistic expectations need to be set at admission.
- A pre-admission questionnaire can start targeting personal student support where it will be needed the most. More students are entering through Clearing, and they may have missed early onboarding and orientation.
- It is important to understand student characteristics and challenge assumptions about students – for example, not all students are digitally competent. Knowing what technology students use to support their learning must inform institutions' digital systems.

- Student characteristics are important in relation to their engagement; increasing numbers of students are trying to manage mental health challenges. Attendance does not equal engagement. Weeks four to five can be viewed as ‘wobble weeks’ where there is often a student crisis of confidence and so this is a key timepoint upon which to reflect, re-adjust and re-engage students. Reducing engagement ‘poverty’ supports student success. Support needs to be available, meaningful, and accessible.
- Students from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds often report ‘impostor syndrome’ and this is exacerbated by institutions largely still designing delivery for ‘traditional’ qualifications.
- A safe space to fail helps builds resilience; we need to create an environment for ‘safe failing’.
- The principles underpinning Scotland’s TQEF provide a landscape to support flexible and nuanced delivery.

STEP pilot projects on student transitions

We then heard about progress being made on the three STEP pilot projects on student transitions. It was heartening to hear the enthusiasm from the teams about their projects and how much they are contributing to their personal development.

Professor Luke Millard and Jane Roscoe presented on their project **Student success through institutional tertiary alignment: pathways, process and design to enable student success**. Luke and Jane spoke about the important partnership between Abertay University and Dundee and Angus College, with students from the College comprising around 11% of the University’s student population. A collaborative project between the institutions has reviewed systematically how students are enabled to succeed. The project involves key stakeholders discussing this shared ambition and re-imagining student deficits as institutional deficits.

Next, Nicola Mulholland from New College Lanarkshire presented her work on **Transitions Learning**. This project involves research into institutional learning and guidance programmes, along with building awareness of SCQF credit rating for supporting higher education entry. Nicola reported that one of the most interesting findings of the project’s survey was in the meta skills responses, as no respondents had mentioned leadership. Nicola shared lessons learned from the project to date: making survey questions more specific, and anticipating responses;

balancing quantitative and qualitative data; being aware of the volume of data generated; and being aware of being overly ambitious with time and resources available.

Finally, Phil Storrier presented about the project **Pedagogy for transitions: setting students up for success through enquiry-based learning**. Phil described his project activity as 'messy', mirroring the process of learning and education. The project has five institutional partners and involves a wide range of stakeholders including students, teaching staff, Vice-Principals, and curriculum and programme managers. Senior staff membership has been important in driving the project meaningfully through well-developed leadership. The project is examining which pedagogical approaches support students the most, helping to debunk the 'secrecy' of pedagogical practices. It supports transitions by producing practical tools, which will be evaluated. The early project findings emphasise that staff resilience is nurtured by having a bigger pedagogical repertoire, which helps students engage.

Tertiary collaboration and journeys



Our second external speaker, Dr Josh Patel, researcher at The Edge Foundation presented on **Four nations approaches to tertiary collaboration and tertiary journeys**. Josh's interactive session included presentation of the findings from a small-scale empirical research project with a focus on Scotland and England. As part of his presentation Josh explored possible meanings of the term 'tertiary' and provided an overview of the political backgrounds of each of the four UK nations.

With a sample size of 17, Josh cautioned that the findings are indicative. He used the analogy of lichen to illustrate tertiary institutions' motivations to collaborate. A symbiotic relationship between institutions helps to build mutual advantages and trust, as well as creating access to new markets and activities aligned with widening participation missions.

Josh engaged participants with his research questions, one of which highlighted that data systems are inadequate for nuanced understanding around student outcomes and achievement. Higher education institutions could make their data available to colleges. There is a need to track specific students longitudinally, but this is challenging without linked-up data.

The day ended with a lively panel discussion hosted by Dr Kyrsten Black of QAA Scotland with Phil Storrier, Nicola Mulholland and Luke Millard.



In the final plenary session, three colleagues gave a brief overview of their takeaways from the Student Transitions Day. In summing up, Dr Gail Toms from College Development Network invited participants to help shape a more inclusive system for students by openly sharing, carrying forward momentum and connections back into institutions from the day. Gail invited three participants in particular to share ‘two stars and a wish’ – two things that struck them as being particularly positive, and one thing that could be built or improved upon. She concluded by thanking participants for attending the day, being part of the movement and encouraged everyone to keep making a difference, one transition at a time.