HTC Conference Day October 2015

1) Outline the project or initiative and what makes it innovative and inspiring (max 300 words).
For many distance learning students the main difficulty with their studies is isolation; being detached from fellow students and from their tutors. The Conference Day helps to overcome that sense of isolation and aims to make the student feel that they are part of a vibrant community of faith and scholarship.

HTC is a worshipping community and communal worship brings a sense of togetherness and belonging as well as an opportunity to hear an inspiring sermon from one of the staff members. Many students detached from college life and working alone do often not get the opportunity to hear an academic paper and the Conference Day allows them to enrich their learning experience in this way. The distance from college also means that the distance learning student has fewer opportunities to discuss their work with their tutors and so tutorial sessions are built into the conference programme to allow students to meet their tutors face to face and to resolve any learning/teaching issues. The library is open to allow students to borrow books or to access any of the resources available. The final set event in the day is a panel discussion in which students are encouraged to ask senior members of the college questions about any subject: the college, UHI, the church or society in general with a view to provoking discussion and airing opinions on a variety of subjects.

A light lunch is provided and there are plenty of opportunities for students to have social interaction with staff or fellow students. On-campus students are also encouraged to attend for their own benefit and also to encourage the visiting distance learning students. Prospective students and visitors are also encouraged to attend with registry and academic staff being on hand to speak to them about any aspect of the courses run by HTC and college life.

2) Detail how the project or initiative was delivered, from the planning stage through to its successful conclusion (max 300 words). Include details of timing* and funding.
Whilst there have been open day/conference days organised by HTC in the past, the October 2014 day was planned to give maximum benefit to the students at both HE and FE levels, to encourage them in their studies, to give them a sense of community and belonging to the college and to enhance the overall student learning experience.

The planning for the Conference Day started in March 2014 through the BA Programme Committee and the Access Programme Committee. A member of the academic staff volunteered to prepare a plenary paper that would be both an example of a formal academic paper but would also be on a topic relevant to students' studies and accessible to students at all levels from Access Course to Honours Degree. The decision was taken to provide a lunch to encourage attendance and particularly for those who had travelled a distance to attend.

Marketing started with applicants for the 20145/15 session of the degree course who were informed of the Conference Day in the Welcome Pack that goes out to all new students. Existing students received several e-mails giving the proposed outline of the day and highlighting the benefits of attending, especially for those who were studying at a distance. A special drive was aimed at the Access Course students as they are all distance learning students and there is no teaching by VC and VLE so they have very little contact with the College. There was particular attention paid to those students who had not submitted work for a while to use the Conference Day as a means of encouraging such students to re-engage with their studies.

The timing of the Conference, at the end of week 7, was designed to be sufficiently far into term that degree students would have plenty of experience of teaching and course materials but not too late to interfere with essay submission and exam preparation.

The resources required for the day were fairly modest with the cost of lunch from a local caterer at approximately £45 and the goodwill of the staff in giving up a Saturday to benefit the students.

3) Outline the project or initiative's outcome(s) within the university and beyond with relevant supporting evidence, metrics or testimony where appropriate (max 400 words).

The Conference Day was successful in achieving its ends. There was a good number of students attending (29 in total), a significant increase over previous years, as well as two prospective students who were able to get a flavour of what studying at HTC would be like, receive information about the courses on offer and to talk to current students and staff.

For the degree students there was good uptake on the tutorial sessions and many of them appreciated the opportunity for a face-to-face discussion with a tutor that they would not ordinarily be able to have. For the Access students there was a time together with several of the Access Course teaching and support staff in which specific individual issues were discussed regarding course work, but there was also an opportunity to discuss how distance learning students could be supported more effectively (suggestions included a regular newsletter, use of social media, e-mail support, Access Course conferences). There was also a time of sharing experiences and mutual encouragement.

The HTC Conference Day in October 2014 was innovative in that it brought both FE and HE students together into a supportive, encouraging environment. There was a chance for the students to interact with one another and with staff on both academic and personal levels.

The BA programme Team, the Access Course Team and the administrative staff worked together to produce an effective programme for the day and to draw the various elements together.

The impact upon the students was to give them a greater sense of belonging to HTC; to lessen the sense of isolation in their studies and to connect with other in a similar situation. The FE students on the Access Course were given the encouragement to continue their studies if they had lapsed and a view of possible progression options upon completion. For both FE and HE students the aim is to enhance their student experience both socially and academically. If that is achieved then the reputation of HTC and UHI is enhanced within both the local Christian community and the Highlands and Islands community generally.