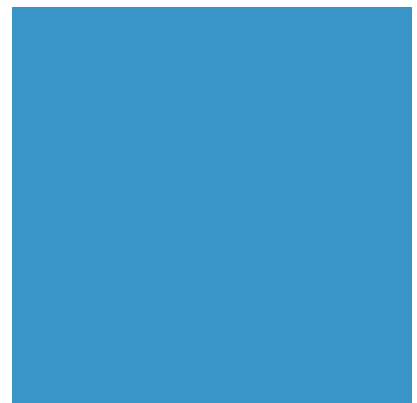




# Annual Report 2021–22



# Introduction

Caroline Turnbull

Acting Director for Scotland,  
Wales and Northern Ireland



Working closely with the sector, QAA Scotland has continued to provide a platform for open, collaborative and enhancement-focused discussion between key stakeholders across the 2021–22 academic year.

Remaining responsive to the needs of the sector, QAA operated in a hybrid manner, continuing to facilitate many of its key activities online including Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) which completed its fourth cycle with the final four reviews (University of Stirling, Robert Gordon University, University of the Highlands and Islands, and Abertay University). Innovation and enhancement has continued to be at the forefront of our minds as we successfully planned for the delivery of Phase 1 of a new external quality review method, beginning in 2022–23.

Our Focus On Project returned in 2021–22 where we explored the potential of [Professional Services Partnerships](#) for enhancing the student experience. Our [Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme](#) also had a successful second year with agencies, institutions and students continuing to work collaboratively to develop meaningful outputs that will have a tangible impact on the student experience. Working together, the sector has delivered enhancement projects on a range of topics linked to the Theme including micro-credentials, recognition of prior learning, and supporting refugees and asylum seekers in higher education.

We successfully delivered a hybrid enhancement conference, [Resilient Learning Communities: Inclusive, Flexible and Accessible](#) in June. This conference brought together more than 400 delegates in-person and online to discuss how we can deliver inclusive, flexible and accessible learning experiences for our students. It is a testament to the commitment and passion of all those involved in Enhancement Themes activity that they continue to deliver such meaningful outcomes almost 20 years on.

As we look ahead to the 20th anniversary of the sector-wide commitment to enhancement in 2022–23, we look forward to celebrating the impact of the enhancement-led approach in Scottish higher education through a [bespoke campaign](#). This landmark achievement comes as we seek to deliver upon the tertiary-wide vision for enhancement that the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has articulated in collaboration with the tertiary sector. We look forward to continued engagement with higher education institutions, colleges and all stakeholders as the implementation of the Tertiary Quality Framework continues.

In embracing the opportunities that the tertiary-wide vision for quality offers, we will continue to work proactively with all stakeholders, placing the enhancement of the student learning experience at the forefront of our work.

# Our work in 2021-22

## Key highlights

For QAA Scotland, highlights of our work show our impact within Scotland and beyond. In 2021-22 these include:



Completion of the ELIR 4 cycle and planning for the delivery of Phase 1 of a new external institutional quality review method, beginning in 2022-23.



Delivery of the second year of the Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme and planning for the launch of the '20 Years of Enhancement' campaign for 2022-23.



Hosting a hybrid International Enhancement Conference, engaging more than 400 representatives from universities and colleges in Scotland.



Continuing to engage with the SFC and the tertiary education sector (universities and colleges) including sector agency partners to explore how a Tertiary Quality Framework can support all key stakeholders in the enhancement of the student learning experience.



Delivery of the Professional Services Partnerships Focus On Project, including hosting our in-person, sharing practice event for over 70 delegates.



Continued engagement with Scottish Government, elected representatives and other key stakeholders to promote the value of the enhancement-led approach, and to maintain trust and confidence in the quality of Scottish higher education.



## About QAA

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is an independent charity working to benefit students and higher education, and one of the world's experts in quality assurance. We are trusted by higher education providers and regulatory bodies to maintain and enhance quality and standards. We work with governments, agencies and institutions globally to benefit UK higher education and its international reputation.

QAA is the only body working in the quality assurance and quality enhancement of higher education across the whole of the UK. As the UK's independent quality body, QAA delivers tailored approaches for each of the four nations, underpinned by our UK-wide work under an inter-connected system of quality. The cornerstone of our UK-wide work is the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

QAA works internationally to promote the interests of UK higher education, to build understanding of the UK higher education system and make it easier for UK providers to operate in other countries and for UK graduates to work globally.

QAA is a full member of the European Association of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA) and listed on the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). Following the very successful review of QAA by ENQA earlier in 2018, QAA's continued listing on the EQAR was confirmed in autumn 2018. QAA will be subject to a further review in February 2023 and we have recently published the [Self-Assessment Report](#) for this process.



QAA's work in Scotland is enhancement-led in order to have a dynamic, responsive approach to quality assurance firmly based on a partnership with the sector involving students and staff. Since 2003, the work of QAA Scotland has been guided by the [Quality Enhancement Framework \(QEF\)](#), which has five elements:

#### **Institution-led Review (ILR)**

QAA Scotland engages with each institution on an annual basis to reflect on the outcomes of these reviews and compiles an annual report to the SFC summarising these activities for the whole Scottish higher education sector.

#### **Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR)**

Incorporates periodic institutional reviews, published reports, thematic analyses, annual discussions and a series of follow-up activities. Whilst the specific method for institutional review will not be called ELIR going forward, ELIR reflects the overall value, ethos and commitment to having an enhancement-led institutional review.

#### **Scotland's Enhancement Themes**

Enhancement Themes bring all Scottish higher education institutions together to participate in a programme of activity designed to deliver change around an agreed strategic topic.

#### **Student engagement and leadership in quality**

In Scotland, our approach involves students as partners at the heart of the system including through the inclusion of student members in all ELIR review teams, through student co-leadership of the Enhancement Themes, and as members of our committees and working groups.

#### **Public information about quality**

QAA Scotland produces public information on quality, through publication of the outcomes of ELIR reviews and other strategic reporting.

QAA Scotland proactively supports the dissemination and exchange of good practice, through institutional reviews, our national enhancement work and the provision of extensive web resources. We are committed to building and maintaining strong and effective relationships with our partners in the sector, with student representative bodies, and with other agencies.



*'It has been an absolute pleasure to work in partnership with QAA Scotland colleagues as deputy theme leader for the current Enhancement Theme. The QAAS team has been proactive, creative and organised in their approach to working across the complexity of the activity that is taking place nationally and within institutions. Their ability and willingness to listen has led to a collaborative approach that enables us to bring the best of our skills and experiences to the enhancement activity. A highlight for 2022 was the Enhancement Theme Conference which brought the sector together brilliantly.'*

**Professor Ruth Taylor**  
Vice-Principal Education, University of Aberdeen

## Review processes

QAA Scotland carries out cyclical external quality assurance review for higher education institutions in Scotland. The culture and fundamental approach of the method used in Scotland is peer review and enhancement-led, with each review taking place at an institutional level.

From 2003 to 2021, the review method was referred to as Enhancement-led Institutional Review, or ELIR, and four cycles took place in that period. We completed the ELIR 4 cycle in 2021–22 with the final four reviews (University of Stirling, Robert Gordon University, University of the Highlands and Islands, and Abertay University), and the re-review of the Glasgow School of Art following its original ELIR review in Spring 2021.

A new method – also enhancement-led and a peer review process – is currently in development. [Phase 1](#) which involves Quality Enhancement and Standards Review (QESR) and Institutional Liaison Meetings (ILM) will operate across the next two academic years (2022–23 and 2023–24), will link back to ELIR 4 and inform Phase 2 of the arrangements. QAA Scotland has [published a new handbook for Phase 1](#).

## Summary of ELIR findings in 2020–21

This section provides a brief summary of some of the key points from the four ELIR reports which were published in the 2021–22 academic year.

**University of Stirling** was commended for its tailored, well planned and agile response to the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring the continued provision of comprehensive student-facing support services. It was also commended for developing a strong institutional commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion, which has been embedded within the University and its collaborative partners.



The ELIR report recommended that the University complete the fundamental review of its approach to data management already underway and use this opportunity to explore and maximise the benefits to be realised from the integration of key University information systems. It also asked the University to introduce a process for reviewing student-facing professional services and to review the current governance and reporting arrangements for the Institute for Advanced Studies.



**Robert Gordon University** was recognised for the deliberate steps it has taken to enhance the development of employability and entrepreneurship skills across the student population and for developing a genuine culture of effective collaboration with learners which is embedded through formal and informal mechanisms at all levels of the institution.



The ELIR team recommended that the University reflect on the way in which institutional policies and practices are implemented at school level to ensure parity of student experience across the institution. It also asked the University to consider and resolve the institutional approach to the grading system to ensure consistency and understanding for students by the start of the 2022 academic year.

**University of the Highlands and Islands** received commendations for its Learning & Teaching Academy which provides an engaging learning and teaching community hub and acts as an effective connection point across the university academic partner network for academic staff development and enhancement. The review team also commended the University for its strategic approach to developing its student mental health provision which has resulted in an effective, well utilised and highly valued set of resources embedded at both university and academic partner levels.



The ELIR report made several recommendations, including asking the University to work in partnership with the Highlands and Islands Students' Association to ensure that there are appropriate mechanisms in place to monitor and address vacancies in student representative structures. They were also asked to make demonstrable practice, within the next academic year, to implement an institution-wide, strategic approach to managing retention.

**Abertay University** was commended for creating a strong culture of partnership working with its student body which ensures effective student representation and engagement in the range of institutional enhancement projects currently underway. The review team also commended the University's commitment to preparing students for employment, which has resulted in well-established links with employers, positively impacts on curriculum development and systematically integrated work-based and work-related learning across programmes.



The review team recommended that the University build on its emerging plans aimed at improving student retention, by developing an evidence-based institutional approach to identify, implement and regularly evaluate the impact and effectiveness of interventions on its retention performance. The ELIR report also recommended that the University undertake work to ensure clear understanding and ownership of institutional strategies among staff.



*'The (review) process has allowed us to reflect on many areas of our operations, including effective stakeholder engagement and our use of data to inform evaluation, action planning and decision-making - both of which were commended by QAA in the report. As a leading modern University, we are committed to continuous improvement, and we will take forward the helpful recommendations of the panel.'*

**Veronica Strachan**  
**University Secretary and Assistant Chief Academic Officer,**  
**Robert Gordon University**

Following **Glasgow School of Art's** ELIR 4 review in October 2020, which found that arrangements for managing academic standards and the student learning experience were of limited effectiveness, the School underwent re-review in 2022.

The re-review found that the School had effective arrangements for managing academic standards, and the student learning experience. The review team commended the School for establishing a culture of openness, transparency and trust which prioritises learning and teaching and the wider student experience across the institution. The report also commended the establishment of a strong and effective senior leadership team, in response to ELIR, which, supported by changes to institutional committee structures, has created a cross-institutional leadership structure within which staff are encouraged and empowered to influence and take ownership of institutional priorities.

The re-review team also made several recommendations, asking the School to develop and implement by the end of the academic year 2022-23 its planned Communication Strategy in order to ensure that effective and accessible communication channels, which are responsive to student content and engagement, are established and embedded across the School. The School was also asked to ensure that prospective students are provided with clear information before entry which confirms the notional minimum levels of studio and workshop availability and access to resources that can be expected on each programme of study, and continue to evaluate this information to ensure student expectations are appropriately managed.

Following the re-review visit, the School is required to produce a Year-on Follow-up report which will detail how the School will both address the recommendations from the re-review process and its continued progress with its original ELIR recommendations. Also, until its next review (June 2024) when it will be subject to QESR, the School is required to continue to hold quarterly liaison meetings with QAA Scotland.

## Focus On

Our Focus On project returned in 2021-22 with [Professional Services Partnerships](#) forming the basis of this year's project. The project focused on two key strands: to understand methodologies and approaches to professional services review (PSR), and to explore, facilitate and communicate professional service partnerships.

Through the first strand, QAA undertook desk-based research of methodologies and approaches used for review of professional services in Scotland. The results are summarised in a [report](#) which includes a set of reflective questions for institutions to consider when developing or reviewing PSR practice.

The second strand explored the impact of professional service partnerships on the student experience. A [video and report](#) discussing student views were produced; the report also includes a set of reflective questions for higher education practitioners and students to consider when reviewing their professional service partnerships.

We hosted an in-person Focus On event in Glasgow on 7 April 2022, bringing together colleagues from across the sector to discuss and reflect on the project themes. More than 70 delegates from 18 institutions participated in this event, including quality professionals, student association staff, student representatives and a wide range of professional service staff including roles in student engagement and student services, employability, business improvement, estates, strategic planning, registry and academic policy.



## Enhancement Themes

Enhancement Themes enable the sector to explore a specific area in depth through both sector-wide, collective activity and programmes of work within each institution. Together the sector achieves far more than institutions could individually, encouraging innovation and the sharing of effective practice with the aim of enhancing the student learning experience in Scottish higher education. Managed by QAA Scotland, the Enhancement Themes have had a positive impact on the Scottish higher education sector since their launch in 2003 and attract interest from around the world.

QAA continued to support [all sector committees responsible for leading the Enhancement Themes](#) including the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC), the Theme Leadership Team (TLT) and the wider Theme Leaders' Group (TLG). These groups continued to meet regularly throughout the 2021-22 session and provided guidance to QAAS on the successful delivery of year two of the current Enhancement Theme.

The second year of the [Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme](#) took place in 2021-22 and we published outputs from six projects:

- [Anti-Racist Curriculum](#)
- [Supporting Refugees and Asylum seekers in Scottish Higher and Further Education](#)
- [Valuing and Recognising Prior Learning and Experience](#)
- [Understanding Micro-credentials and Small Qualifications in Scotland](#)
- [Personalised Approaches to Resilience and Community \(PARC\)](#)
- [Promoting the Equity of the Student Learning Experience \(Student-led Project\)](#)

QAA once again worked with [student partnerships in quality scotland \(sparqs\)](#) on the delivery of the [Student-led Project](#) as part of the Theme. This project sought to develop an understanding of 'equity' in the context of learning and teaching and the student experience. It also sought to make recommendations for equitable learning and teaching practices that respond to the diverse needs of students. The project resulted in the production of a series of case studies on the themes of pedagogy, accessibility and digital technologies. A report was produced based on desk research exploring key existing theory, practice and research relating to equity in blended learning and teaching. A 'top tips' document on developing equitable learning communities was also produced, which complimented a Guide for Student Reps, designed to act as a foundation for starting conversations around equity.

Institutions have designed and implemented their own programmes of work alongside contributing to the sector-wide and collaborative projects. QAA's [overview report for year 2](#) of the Theme identified around 106 projects underway across 16 participating institutions, which is a mix of continuing and new projects. There were 35 students and 157 staff involved in institutional enhancement projects. Institutional enhancement work related to a range of topics including assessment; building communities and community development; equality, diversity and inclusion; student success/progression; and student wellbeing.

QAA hosted its two-day hybrid International Enhancement Conference, [Resilient Learning Communities – Inclusive, Flexible and Accessible](#) on the 8 and 9 June 2022. The conference brought together more than 400 delegates from across our universities and colleges who support the delivery of higher education to make connections, learn from best practice and discuss enhancement in Scotland. Delegate feedback about the conference was extremely positive with participants welcoming the opportunity to attend both in-person and online as QAA Scotland successfully delivered its first hybrid event.

We were also delighted to learn from our keynote presenters:

- Dr Amanullah De Sony, Head of Department – Study of Religions, Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Islam, Chair of Race Equality Forum, University College Cork, Ireland
- Professor Ruth Whittaker, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Education and Students, University of Brighton
- Dr Delroy Hall, DelWes Consultancy

The conference also included a Civic Reception in the spectacular Picture Gallery in Glasgow City Chambers, where guests were formally welcomed by Depute Lord Provost Bailie Christy Mearns.

2022-23 will mark the [20th anniversary of the enhancement-led approach in Scottish higher education](#). QAA has continued to work on the evaluation of the Resilient Learning Communities Theme and all previous Enhancement Themes activities across the last 20 years. Consultants have been engaged to undertake [Theme evaluation](#), supported by an expert reference group. They will report on the evaluation activity at QAA's International Enhancement Conference in June 2023.





## Continued stakeholder engagement

QAA has continued to meet regularly with key stakeholders in the Scottish sector including the Scottish Government, Scottish Funding Council and others to ensure they are informed of the work being carried out by QAA in partnership with the sector to maintain trust and confidence in the quality of higher education. QAA continues to meet with members of the Scottish Parliament's Education, Children and Young People Committee including their new convenor Sue Webber MSP to update members on latest quality matters. The Scottish Parliamentary Cross-Party Group on Colleges and Universities, which QAA is represented on, spoke positively about the Enhancement Themes and the cross-sectoral commitment to enhancing the student learning experience.

QAA continues to support the Quality Arrangements for Scottish Higher Education (QASHE) Group to provide an effective forum for Scottish sector stakeholders to discuss the impact of quality arrangements on Scotland. This forum provides an opportunity for the Scottish representative on the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA) to gather views from across the Sector ahead of UKSCQA meetings. This year the committee has received regular updates from SFC on the development of a Tertiary Quality Framework for Scotland and has informed QAA's work to develop a set of [principles for external examining practice across the UK](#).

We encourage stakeholders to sign up to the regular [Quality Enhancement Newsletter](#) for Scotland, and follow our [profiles on social media](#) to keep up to date about ongoing and future activity and opportunities for engagement with QAA Scotland.



*'As a student currently pursuing an undergraduate degree, my work with the Enhancement Themes and the QAA has made me feel involved and heard in the shaping of my education. My most valuable experiences come from the ability to collaborate and work closely with student representatives from various Scottish universities and colleges through the student-led project. The level of independence and guidance we were provided with helped us explore the idea of learning spaces and communities. It was very exciting to see how student interpretations of this theme diverged based on various factors like institution size or location.'*

**Hitanshi Badani**  
Enhancement Themes Deputy Student Lead



## Towards a tertiary system

The Scottish Government responded to the SFC Review of Coherent provision and sustainability in the Scottish tertiary education sector in October 2021. Overall, the Scottish Government accepted the recommendations of the review to develop a clear strategic longer-term vision and intent for the future of tertiary education and research that incorporates multi-year funding assumptions and commitments, and a new National Impact Framework.

QAA continues to meet with SFC on a regular basis to discuss plans to develop a Tertiary Quality Framework and SFC provides regular updates at QAA's Scotland Strategic Advisory Committee, and at the QASHE Group. QAA continues to forge strong links with the college sector in Scotland through the current Enhancement Theme activity and seeks opportunities to include college sector colleagues within our enhancement activity. For example, during 2021-22 the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC) was joined by a representative from the College Development Network (CDN) Colleges VP Network.

For example, as part of the Understanding Micro-credentials and Small Qualifications Enhancement Themes project, a Scottish Tertiary Education Network for micro-credentials has been established with representatives from higher education institutions, colleges, students and stakeholders. Our relationship and collaboration with colleges will develop as we seek to fulfil the outcomes of the SFC review.





# Looking forward

Professor John Sawkins

Chair of the QAA Scotland  
Strategic Advisory Committee



Whilst the sector continued to deal with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic throughout 2021-22, the delivery of in-person teaching and learning accelerated as the year went on, complemented by a number of hybrid and in-person conferences and events delivered by QAA Scotland.

Throughout the year, QAA remained closely aligned with the sector, working to ensure that conversations involving as wide a range of stakeholders as possible were facilitated effectively. An example of this, and a highlight of the year was the QAA's International Enhancement Conference. This hybrid event attracted more than 400 delegates and proved a valuable opportunity for sharing new insights and ideas. In addition, the year also saw the successful completion of the ELIR 4 cycle of Enhancement-led Institutional Reviews, the second year of the Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme and the delivery of a Focus On Project on Professional Services Partnerships. Continuous engagement with the sector is critical to QAA's work, and so through webinars, publications and regular meetings with key stakeholders relationships have been fostered and deepened.

During 2022-23 we will see the delivery of Phase 1 of the new two-phase review approach for external institutional review and the completion of the current Enhancement Theme, culminating in QAA's two-day International Enhancement Conference to be hosted in Glasgow in June 2023.

Looking forward to the 20th anniversary of the Quality Enhancement Framework in 2022-23 and we remain committed to the enhancement-led approach to quality – a progressive approach pioneered in Scotland and now emulated internationally.

The ongoing work of the Scottish Funding Council around the development of a Tertiary Quality Framework provides an important opportunity for higher education institutions and colleges to come together to shape a tertiary-wide vision for enhancement. QAA Scotland remains committed to working with the Scottish Government, Scottish Funding Council and all stakeholders across the tertiary education sector to implement this vision.

The QAA Scotland Advisory Committee looks forward to supporting the QAA in ensuring Scotland's enhancement-led approach continues to inform and support the delivery of high-quality education for students across Scotland.

## Our year in numbers

### QAA Scotland and Enhancement Themes Websites

#### QAA Scotland

**39,244** Page views

**25,553** Sessions

**15,889** Users

**2,953** Document downloads

#### ET

**44,366** Page views

**22,121** Sessions

**13,040** Users

**7,972** Document downloads

#### Youtube

**159** subscribers  13.6%

#### LinkedIn


**511** Followers at end of year  22.2%

#### Quality Enhancement Newsletter


**818** Total recipients  6.4%

#### Twitter

##### @QAAScotland

**1,545** Followers at end of year  
 4.6%

##### @THEMEStweets

**1674** Followers at end of year  
 3%

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