Enhancement-led Institutional Review of Queen Margaret University

Technical Report

April 2013

Contents

About the Enhancement-led Institutional Review method

A dedicated page of the QAA website explains the method for Enhancement-led Institutional Review of higher education institutions in Scotland and has links to the ELIR handbook and other informative documents.[1] You can also find more information about QAA and its mission.[2]

Further details about the enhancement-led approach can be found in an accompanying ELIR information document,[3] including an overview of the review method, definitions of the judgement categories, and explanations of follow-up action. It also contains information on the Scottish Funding Council's response to ELIR judgements.

About this review

This is the Technical Report of the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. The review took place as follows: Part 1 visit on 26-28 February and Part 2 visit on 22-26 April 2013. The review was conducted by a team of six reviewers:

- Mr Mark Charters (student reviewer)
- Professor Howard Colley (academic reviewer)
- Ms Lesley Howie (academic reviewer)
- Dr Maggie King (coordinating reviewer)
- Professor Diane Meehan (academic reviewer)
- Professor Martin Oosthuizen (international reviewer).

In advance of the review visits, the University submitted a self-evaluative document (the Reflective Analysis) and an advance information set, comprising a range of materials about the institution's arrangements for managing quality and academic standards. In addition, the University submitted a case study: the National Student Survey.

About this report

In this report, the ELIR team:

- delivers an overarching judgement on the current and likely future effectiveness of the institution's arrangements for managing academic standards and enhancing the quality of the student learning experience.

The overarching judgement can be found on page 3, followed by the detailed findings of the review given in numbered paragraphs.

ELIR Technical Reports are intended primarily for the institution which hosted the review, and to provide an information base for the production of thematic reports which identify findings across several institutions.

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[1] Further information about the ELIR method: www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/pages/elir.aspx
[2] Further information about QAA: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus
[3] ELIR information document: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/ELIR-information.aspx

Technical Reports set out the ELIR team's view under each of the report headings. Shorter Outcome Reports are provided which set out the main findings of the ELIR for a wider audience. The [Outcome Report](#) for this review is on the QAA website.[4]

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[4] Outcome Report: www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/Reports/Pages/ELIR-QMU-13.aspx

Overarching judgement about Queen Margaret University

Queen Margaret University has **effective** arrangements for managing academic standards and the student learning experience. These arrangements are likely to continue to be effective in the future.

This is a positive judgement, which means the University has robust arrangements for securing academic standards and for enhancing the quality of the student experience.

1 Institutional context and strategic framework

1.1 Key features of the institution's context and mission

1   Queen Margaret University has around 6,500 students studying in disciplines allied to health science, arts, social sciences and business management. The disciplines are located in seven divisions within the Schools of Health Sciences and Arts, Social Sciences and Management. In 2007 the University moved to a new, purpose-built campus that includes student accommodation as well as academic, administrative and sports facilities. The University derives a significant proportion of income from research and knowledge exchange. In 2013 it will submit six units to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and these units are all linked to the flagship discipline areas mentioned in the following paragraph. Leadership and management is provided by the Senior Management Team (SMT) and Executive Board with additional representation of schools, academic and professional services on the latter.

2   Since the previous ELIR in 2009, the University has been engaged in a significant review of all aspects of its operations through the *Reorganisation for Sustainability* project which has been a catalyst for significant strategic change. The project included a review of the University's governance arrangements and committee structure as well as its portfolio of programmes. The latter was guided by the University's intention to deliver programmes which are inter-professional, inter-disciplinary, industry-relevant and which can enhance its international reputation. This has resulted in a focus on three flagship areas in health and rehabilitation, sustainable business, and culture and creativity. Currently the University is in the initial stage of developing its next strategic development project, QM150.

3   Staff have been closely involved with the development and implementation of the *Reorganisation for Sustainability* project and in meetings with the ELIR team gave examples of their involvement. Student representatives including sabbatical officers confirmed their engagement with strategic and operational decision-making and their involvement in early discussions on QM150. A strategic development fund is available for financially sustainable projects that aim to improve the student experience. Decisions on funding these projects are made by the Executive Board. Staff and students were also very positive about the benefits that the new campus had brought to learning and teaching.

4   The Reflective Analysis (RA) indicated that there are no immediate plans for significant growth in on-campus undergraduate student numbers and this was confirmed in meetings with senior staff. Strategic growth, as part of the QM150 discussions, has been a key topic for the University Court. It was considered essential that any future growth in student numbers should not change the nature and ethos of the University; students very much valued being part of a small, friendly institution.

5   Given the strategic change arising from the *Reorganisation for Sustainability* project, the University identified that they would welcome feedback on the Student Experience and QELTA strategies, continuous enhancement through the academic cycle and partnership working with students.

1.2   Strategic approach to enhancing learning and teaching

6   The University's overarching Strategic Plan 2012-15 includes discrete strategies for: the Student Experience; Research and Knowledge Exchange; and Internationalisation. Oversight of the progress and implementation of these strategies is provided by three standing committees of Senate. School and Professional Services operational plans are key elements in the delivery of the strategic plan. All strategies have key performance indicators (KPIs), with quarterly review by the Executive Board, Senate and Court where progress against targets is tracked using a traffic light system. This is a relatively new system and has been extended to schools and professional services to measure progress on the actions required by their operational plans. Staff also provided evidence of individual goals, identified as part of their annual Performance Enhancement Review, taking account of institutional strategies and objectives (see paragraph 50).

7   The University drew attention to possible overlap between the Student Experience Strategy and the Quality Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (QELTA) Strategy. Although some overlap between the strategies was recognised by the ELIR team, evidence provided by staff demonstrated that there was a good understanding of their complementary nature with the clear goals and activities of QELTA providing staff with an explicit framework for enhancement of learning and teaching.

8   The University has an effective set of arrangements for managing the business of its main committees through delegating routine business and careful management of the agendas. The Student Experience Committee (SEC), which has a wide remit including oversight of a number of strategies (eg the Student Experience Strategy and QELTA)delegates its routine business to the Learning and Teaching Panel. This releases space for the senior committee to focus on broader academic debate and strategic direction. Panel business is reported back to the SEC for final confirmation and verification. Similar panels covering research degrees and research ethics are in place for the Research Strategy Committee. The Senate has created space for strategic matters using the same format of starred and non-starred agenda items used by SEC. The ELIR team found evidence through review of committee and panel papers and in meetings with staff that the process is working effectively and that this was an example of positive practice.

9   The role of the Internationalisation Committee has recently been reviewed with its remit now split between two groups: the International Student Forum and the Collaborations Operations Group, both of which report to the SEC. This adds to the wide remit of the SEC, therefore it is important that the University continues to manage the business of SEC in a manner which allows it to remain focused on strategic matters and to have effective oversight of the internationalisation strategy.

1.3   Effectiveness of the approach to implementing strategies

10   The operation of SEC and Senate was found to be effective through the use of standing committees and panels along with a carefully managed agenda which allowed time for reflection and rigorous debate of academic matters. There was also secure evidence of academic matters progressing through to SEC following their discussion at school and programme meetings.

12   The ELIR team found the operational relationships between Executive Board, the Senior Management Team (SMT), Senate and Court to be effective. It was noted that key decisions on issues such as resourcing involved the full Executive Board.

13   Leadership and management of the University has been recognised through achievement of a national award in 2012. Staff and students commented very favourably on the Principal's visibility and approachability. The ELIR team also noted the close and effective working relationship between academic and non-academic areas achieved through the leadership of the Deputy Principal and University Secretary. Overall, the ELIR team recognised the University as an open and reflective institution committed to delivering strategic change through careful and inclusive management.

2   Enhancing the student learning experience

2.1   Composition and key trends in the student population, including typical routes into and through the institution

14   The majority of students enrolled on programmes at the Edinburgh campus are 21 years of age and over (71 per cent) and female (76 per cent). In terms of national profile, the trend since 2008-09 reflects a growing proportion of enrolments from the rest of the UK (20 per cent) and EU (10 per cent), which is offset by a decline in the percentage of enrolments from Scotland (68 per cent in 2008-09 to 60 per cent in 2011-12). The percentage of international students outside the EU has remained stable at just over 10 per cent. During the same period the percentage of students in postgraduate taught programmes has risen from 23 to 33 per cent, and this shift reflects the University's strategy to increase its postgraduate enrolments. Students enrolled in part-time taught postgraduate programmes made up almost 70 per cent of the total postgraduate enrolments in 2011-12, compared to 63 per cent in 2008-09.This increase is mainly due to the majority of continuing professional development programmes in Nursing shifting towards postgraduate level.

15   In terms of widening access, 94 per cent of young, full-time entrants come from state schools and colleges, with 32 per cent of such students from social classes four, five, six, and seven. Eight per cent of the full-time entrants articulate from an HNC or HND. First generation students make up 36 per cent of young, full-time entrants. Students with a declared disability comprise nine per cent of the full-time undergraduate Scottish domiciled enrolments, which is two per cent above the sector benchmark. The University's Outcome Agreement with the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) indicated that, during 2012-13, 13 per cent of Scottish-domiciled students were from SIMD 20, 15 per cent were direct entry students, and 17 per cent were from low progression schools.

2.2   Supporting equality and diversity in the student population

16   The University has an effective approach to supporting equality and diversity in the student population. The University's commitment is guided by its Single Equality Scheme which is overseen by the Equality and Diversity Committee (EDC). The Equality Action Plan is informed by data on applications, progression and retention, exam awards, academic appeals and complaints which are updated annually. The EDC also considers the embedding of equality and diversity within the curriculum and shares practice down to the subject level.

Support for widening participation

17   The University was a founding member of the Lothian Equal Access Programme for Schools (LEAPS) and engages in a number of widening participation initiatives, including its partnership with the East Lothian Council and Edinburgh College. With the latter, the East Lothian Hospitality and Tourism Academy promotes employability amongst young people aged between 14 and 18 and also supports articulation into higher education. At the time of the ELIR visit a number of further academies were about to be launched in the University's flagship areas.

18   Various pre-entry and induction programmes are available to support students from widening participation groups and these include QMAdvance, QMAssist, QMConnect and MentorNet. QMAdvance is a three-day orientation programme particularly aimed at widening participation students, QMAssist is an induction programme for direct entrants and QMConnect and MentorNet, run by Student Services, are face-to-face and online mentoring schemes. Students who experienced the pre-entry and induction programmes gave positive feedback about the support, although they would have appreciated more course specific information.

19   The establishment of the Student Retention Project Board (SRPB) in 2009 has allowed the University to adopt a more systematic approach to student retention, as evidenced by the overall undergraduate retention rate of about 92 per cent. Retention rates for specific groups, such as SIMD20 students, are above the University's target. The Board has coordinated the development of a framework for Widening Participation and Student Retention (WISeR) with more regular reporting on retention and withdrawal patterns amongst students from diversity groups. The ELIR team considered that this represents an example of the effective use of management information that supports the SRPB in setting priorities for retention focused on disabled students, mature male students, direct entrants, BME students and students from SIMD20. Academic and professional units are also invited to submit proposals for retention projects with, for example, the Effective Learning Service (ELS) developing a resit support programme.

Support for international students

20   The Recruitment and International Liaison Service (RILO) provides induction and support programmes with advice on funding, practical aspects of studying in the UK, student welfare and social opportunities. The University hosts an international induction day prior to the start of the general induction week and the QMConnect programme was revised during 2012 to make specific provision for support to international students. The Effective Learning Service (ELS) offers international students support in English language through a four week pre-sessional course or during their studies by means of one to one appointments. The course is currently being reviewed to ensure that students develop appropriate levels of competence, especially where they have only met the minimum International English Language Testing System (IELTS) threshold for entry.

21   In December 2012, the University conducted a review of the support provided to international students which identified various positive aspects, including the responsiveness of RILO staff, improvements to pre-entry support, and the work of the ELS. Based on the review, the University is considering the creation of a central support location for international students, mechanisms for improving cultural awareness amongst all members of staff and increased support for learning and teaching that effectively addresses a diversity of educational backgrounds.

Support for disabled students

22   Support for disabled students is provided through a network of Academic Disabled Student Coordinators within schools who are supported by two disability advisers and an assistive technology adviser based at the central disability service within Student Services.

Student feedback, as reflected in the disability survey and in ELIR team meetings with students, indicates that there is a high level of satisfaction with the support provided by the disability service. The ELIR team also noted as positive practice the disability service's involvement with validation and review events to promote inclusivity in the curriculum and programme delivery.

2.3   Engaging and supporting students in their learning

23   The University has an effective approach to engaging and supporting students in their learning. The QELTA strategy states that, to achieve engagement in learning, students must be placed at the centre of the learning process and have access to appropriate support structures. These aspirations form the institutional context for the operational plans of the academic schools and the various support services. Students expressed the view that partnership meant 'being valued' and 'having a say in what goes on in the University'. They commented positively on their learning experiences and expressed the opinion that the approaches taken by academic staff supported their development as autonomous learners. Staff echoed this, referring to a real sense of partnership with students as active contributors to their programmes.

Student representation and gathering student feedback

24   The University carried out a review of the class representatives' experience in April 2012 and, as a result, has implemented a number of developments in 2012-13 including: additional class representative training sessions; a revised handbook; and trialling of a reflective diary. The Students' Union has also introduced two awards for class representatives and has established the Academic Council, chaired by the Students' Union President, for all class representatives across the University. Students confirmed that they are made to feel welcome at committee meetings and that these meetings adopt a partnership approach where they feel part of the decision-making process.

25   The University's Doctoral Students' Association (DSA) has no formal link to the Students' Union, but it promotes development opportunities for research students through collaboration with the Centre for Academic Practice (CAP), the Quality Enhancement Unit (QEU) or through external bodies. The Co-Chairs of the DSA also represent students on the Research Strategy Committee and the Student Experience Committee. Postgraduate research students indicated that this was a beneficial representative system which offers various opportunities for development and support.

26   Module evaluation is carried out by staff and analysis of results informs annual monitoring and ongoing programme development. Students commented that a variety of approaches are adopted to module evaluation, including hard copy, online through the virtual learning environment, and mid and end of module review. They also commented that, in their experience, not all modules were being evaluated.

27   Student feedback is captured through the use of numerous internal and external surveys. Extensive work has been undertaken on the NSS leading to a number of enhancement projects and initiatives. The University will also engage with the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) this year. Students and staff commented on the extensive use of student surveys (see paragraph 66).

Induction
28   The University's approach to inducting students involves both induction on entry and longitudinal induction with the former processes being overseen by the Transition and Induction Working Group and the latter by the academic subject areas. There are a number of elements to the University's approach including an induction website, the use of

continuing students as helpers throughout Induction Week, and mentoring through QMConnect (see paragraph 17). Longitudinal induction resulted from the University's work within the First Year Experience and Graduates for the 21st Century national Enhancement Themes.

29   Students spoke of varied experiences of induction. All were generally positive regarding induction on entry to the University and particularly valued elements such as QMConnect and the University's Induction website. However students on undergraduate programmes were generally unfamiliar with the concept of longitudinal induction, although postgraduate (taught and research) students recognised this approach.

Personal Academic Tutors

30   Recently, the University has reviewed its approach to Personal Development Planning (PDP) and linked this to a revised Personal Academic Tutoring (PAT) system with new procedures, comprehensive guidelines and supporting information for staff and students. The ELIR team explored PDP with students and the majority were aware of the concept if not the terminology and gave examples of how this was addressed through specific modules and programmes with variable involvement from Personal Academic Tutors. In view of this, the University is encouraged to evaluate the effectiveness of the revised Personal Academic Tutor system as a mechanism for delivering PDP.

Support for student learning

31   The University provides a comprehensive range of support including counselling, careers, financial, medical and disability support services. The Careers and Student Employability Service (CASES) has a very proactive approach working with students in and outside of the curriculum and in running numerous events to engage with students.

32   The University's assessment regulations indicate that students should expect to receive assessment feedback in a timely manner and no later than 20 working days following the submission deadline. They are to be informed if there are delays in providing feedback. Meetings with students, staff and minutes of student staff consultative committees (SSCCs) show that there is still significant variability in return of student feedback and in informing students of delays. The University is encouraged to ensure that its requirements for the timely return of assessment feedback are implemented consistently.

Learning environment

33   The learning environment encourages staff and students to engage with each other outside the classroom. Students were very complimentary about access to academic and professional services staff, and about their responsiveness to issues and questions. This typifies an institutional culture of accessibility and responsiveness to students by both academic and professional services staff. The Learning Resource Centre (LRC) is open 24/7 and provides library services. Students were also very complimentary about the support received from library staff.

34   A technology-enhanced learning team in the Centre for Academic Practice (CAP) provides support to help academic staff engage with new technologies and the University's virtual learning environment, the Hub. The University uses a number of other tools to engage students in their learning including online portfolios, wikis, online synchronous learning environments and web peer assessment (WebPA). Students spoke of variable experience of these tools within their programmes, some using them extensively and others not at all.

35   Every module has an area in the Hub and, while students acknowledged that there had been improvements to the Hub, they expressed concern about the variability of its use by staff across modules and programmes, the time required to find relevant information and there not being any information available on some modules other than module guides. The

ELIR team also noted the same concerns expressed in minutes of SSCCs and programme committees. The University is, therefore, encouraged to prioritise taking action to address student concerns about the accessibility and extent of module information on the Hub.

Postgraduate research students

36   Schools have overall responsibility for the quality of research students' learning experience, with central oversight achieved through the Research Strategy Committee. The recent establishment of a Graduate School is starting to provide an academic support network for research students and supervisory staff. The key aims are to promote and develop the research culture at the University by acting as both a point of reference and a social hub. Students found that the Graduate School met these aims and postgraduate research students spoke positively of the induction provided by the Graduate School staff, and the support they received from their supervisors and from the wider University.

2.4   Approaches to promoting the development of graduate attributes, including employability

37   Graduate attributes were introduced in 2008 and then developed further through the University's work around the Graduates for the 21st Century national Enhancement Theme. The Student Experience and QELTA strategies map the University's approach to embedding graduate attributes. Academic staff also encourage students to engage with placements and community activities to promote specific graduate attributes. The ELIR team found that students were aware of graduate attributes but terminology meant that students did not easily recognise their acquisition of the designated skills and attributes.

38   The University's portfolio of programmes demonstrates a strong commitment to vocational and work-based learning and employability appears as a theme in both the Student Experience and QELTA strategies. Approaches to the promotion of employability for all students include the use of employability champions; entrepreneurship modules; volunteering opportunities and the World of Work week. The Futurefocus website also provides information for students about employability and personal development. Placements are built into many of the University's programmes and CASES provides support for students applying for placements.

39   Programme teams work closely with Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) with a high proportion of the University's programmes having PSRB accreditation. There are also strong formal and informal links with employers for example through employer panels and the use of employers on programme review and validation panels. The Business Innovation Zone, operated in conjunction with East Lothian Council and housing the Business Gateway, is located on the University's campus. It operates as a one-stop-shop for small businesses and individuals, including the University's graduates, and there are good examples of graduates utilising this facility effectively. The University is also collaborating with another local University to meet the needs of local employers as part of its response to the SFC's regionalisation agenda. The University is a lead partner in a SFC-funded project aimed at placing interns in community, voluntary and charitable organisations.

2.5   Effectiveness of the approach to enhancing the student learning experience

40   There is clear evidence of the effectiveness of formal representative structures and examples of students contributing to strategic projects and curriculum development. Student representation is in place at all levels of the University and students view this as effective and beneficial in capturing and championing their voice. In this respect, student feedback is

recognised as important and it is clear that action is taken as a result of feedback on modules and the findings of surveys.

41   Support for learning is delivered by a number of professional services in collaboration with academic staff. Students were very positive about the provision of support offered and were aware of numerous sources of support. The disability service and the Careers and Student Employability Service (CASES) in particular demonstrate a number of good practice approaches to working collaboratively across the University in their pursuit of embedding employability in a curriculum accessible to all students.

42   The learning environment has been specifically designed to be conducive to learning and the application of learning technologies has been evolving and growing within the University. The ELIR team noted good practice in the use of digital media devices. However, staff utilisation of the Hub remains inconsistent and the University is encouraged to give further consideration to improving the extent to which it is used.

Enhancement in learning and teaching

3.1   Approaches to identifying and sharing good practice

43   The University has an effective approach to identifying and sharing good practice. There is an overall strategic framework for the enhancement of learning and teaching, and individual staff and teams are empowered to develop new ideas that are relevant to their own practice. A Dissemination and Engagement Strategy gives the Centre for Academic Practice (CAP) a pivotal role as a change agent, innovator, and mediator of good practice. The Academic Team, an informal group comprising the Director of CAP, the Head of the Research and Knowledge Exchange Unit, the Deans, the University Secretary and the Deputy Principal, provides further support and leadership for enhancement. Student-led teaching awards also identify good practice and provide an imaginative way for students to recognise and reward staff.

44   Committees provide a formal, structured mechanism for disseminating and stimulating discussion around good practice with links between committees at all levels allowing staff to identify and share good practice. The CAP, Quality Enhancement Unit (QEU) and other professional services are well represented in the University's committee structure, providing effective information flow and links through the annual monitoring process and operational plans to institutional strategies and policies. A recent survey on the impact of staff learning from good practice confirmed the central role of the CAP in supporting and developing good practice.

45   A Programme Leaders' Network, coordinated by the Director of CAP, has proved to be effective in identifying and sharing good practice. The Network facilitates discussion between programme leaders regarding their roles and responsibilities, management of programmes and identification of good practice. Recently, attendance at the meetings has become variable and, in a positive response, CAP is reviewing the operation of this Network to encourage greater staff engagement.

3.2   Impact of the national Enhancement Themes and related activity

46   The national Enhancement Themes have had a visible impact on the University's policy and practices. The University views the Enhancement Themes as key reference points and has been actively involved in their development through participation in the Theme steering committees since their introduction in 2003. The University's strategic developments, policy and practice have been informed by the Themes and examples include

the introduction of longitudinal induction, linking of the University's six research themes to teaching, and the development of integrative assessments. The Enhancement Theme Institutional Team has been involved with activities relating to the current Theme, Developing and Supporting the Curriculum.

3.3   Engaging and supporting staff

47   The University has effective arrangements for engaging and supporting staff. The CAP plays a lead role in academic staff development across the University and it offers a programme of development workshops in addition to individual and small group support. Staff development is also provided through other departments and functions. For example, the Quality Enhancement Unit has a key role in supporting academic staff in validation and review activity.

48   CAP provision includes Higher Education Academy (HEA)-accredited courses leading to Associate Fellow and Fellow status. New staff without previous experience of higher education teaching must attend the Postgraduate Certificate in Professional and Higher Education. HEA accreditation of the University's CPD framework is due to take place in 2014. The framework will provide a structure for staff at all levels to gain HEA recognition through accredited study and courses, and will include revalidation of the PgCert/MSc in Professional and Higher Education. Six staff are currently making individual applications for Senior and Principal Fellowship with the HEA and this provides an example of CAP support for individual staff development.

49   Postgraduate research students, who undertake teaching duties, are encouraged to participate in the short course in Learning, Teaching and Assessment. The University confirmed that there are no mandatory requirements for postgraduate research students to undergo formal training before they teach. In line with the UK Quality Code for HIgher Education (the Quality Code), the University is encouraged to ensure that all of those involved in teaching receive appropriate training and support for this role.

50   The University's peer observation of teaching policy is published on the Quality Enhancement Unit website and there is an expectation that all members of academic staff, including the very experienced, will observe at least once and be observed at least once in every academic year. The ELIR team found that this is not common practice for some disciplines and a strong case was made by staff for team teaching as a proxy for peer observation.

51   An updated Performance Enhancement Review (PER) process was introduced for all staff in 2011. Staff are expected to maintain personal development plans to show clear connections to the institutional strategies and the operational plans of schools and professional services. Staff provided examples of how the PER development plans linked to University and school strategies. The ELIR team considered that the PER system is operating effectively and that linkage of personal development plans to strategies was an area of positive practice.

3.4   Effectiveness of the approach to promoting good practice in learning and teaching

52   The ELIR team found that the University has a culture of reflection and continuous improvement, as evidenced through the engagement of staff and students in the sharing of good practice. A wide range of mechanisms are in place to identify and share good practice including the work of the Centre for Academic Practice (CAP) and the Quality Enhancement Unit, the Programme Leaders Network and committees at all levels. There is also substantial

evidence of involvement with external activities, in particular the national Enhancement Themes.

53   The CAP has a pivotal role in developing and supporting learning and teaching, thereby making a key contribution to enhancing the student learning experience. The ELIR team found much positive practice arising from the activities of the CAP.

Academic standards

4.1   Approach to setting, maintaining and reviewing academic standards

54   The University's approach to setting, maintaining and reviewing academic standards is based upon robust and self-reflective procedures for annual monitoring, validation and review. Self-reflection at an institutional level is achieved through the discussion of a number of overview reports by the Student Experience Committee (SEC), and these reports give an accurate reflection of good practice and areas for development identified in the individual programme level reports and external examiner reports. The SEC minutes indicate that appropriate action plans for improvement arise from the overview reports.

55   Procedures, policies and regulations available on the Quality at QMU website form a framework for setting, maintaining and reviewing standards. The website is well structured allowing straightforward access to comprehensive and high quality guidance on all aspects of academic regulation, quality assurance and quality enhancement.

56   The SEC is the main locus for strategic discussion of quality assurance and enhancement (see paragraph 8). Minutes from programme committees, school academic boards, the Learning and Teaching Panel and the SEC show matters of institutional significance (for example student attendance) receiving attention at all levels and generating appropriate action plans.

57   The University's approach to programme design, validation and review is carefully aligned with the Quality Code. The Portfolio Development Group takes a strategic decision on whether a proposed programme is consistent with the mission and strategic direction of the University, and considers its academic rationale, level compliance and staffing resource in a two stage process. Minutes of PDG meetings demonstrate a robust approach to evaluating proposals. Reports of validation and review events have detailed critical comment and analysis and commonly have stringent conditions to be met before final approval. External reviewers have commented favourably on the validation and review process, and postgraduate research students reported that serving on panels provided a valuable insight into academic procedures.

58   External examiner reports are considered by the Programme Leader and responses are approved either by the Dean of School or, in the case of questions on regulations, by the Assistant Registrar. The Quality Enhancement Unit also monitors responses to actions requested by external examiners. Full reports are seen by student representatives on programme committees and annual summary reports are posted on the Quality at QMU website.

4.2   Management of assessment

59   There is a comprehensive and well-structured set of assessment regulations which includes policy and principles. The Programme Leaders Handbook also gives clear guidance on the management of assessment.

60   External examiners report satisfaction with the administration of examination boards. Criticism over the lengthy agenda of new divisional examination boards in the School of Health Sciences has led to the requirement that external examiners only attend for those items of the Board relevant to their responsibilities. In their reports external examiners have noted the alignment of assessment with learning outcomes and, in some cases, the very effective integration of theory and practice.

61   In 2010 the University established an extenuating circumstances panel in order to streamline the business coming to examination boards. Although increasing in number, the University still has a relatively small proportion of appeals, most of which relate to extenuating circumstances with a small number relating to irregularities with assessment procedures. The University has an effective approach to dealing with student appeals.

4.3   Use of external reference points in managing academic standards

62   External examiners, through a tick box on their annual reports, confirm that the programmes are aligned with external reference points such as subject benchmarks and the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF). The University has also been mapping its academic practice against the Quality Code as sections of the code are published.

63   Examples provided for the ELIR team showed that validation processes take account of the SCQF, Quality Code, subject benchmarks and other external reference points where appropriate (for example PSRB requirements) in the design of new programmes. The alignment of programmes with external reference points is set out in further detail in programme specifications. An annual report of validation and review events is compiled by the Quality Enhancement Unit (QEU) and submitted to the Student Experience Committee (SEC) and also considered by the Senate and Court. This is a thorough analysis highlighting good practice and areas for development; it also records overall satisfaction with the processes from the external panellists.

4.4   Effectiveness of the arrangements for securing academic standards

64   The University has effective arrangements for securing academic standards. The SEC receives an annual summary report from QEU on the good practice identified in external examiner reports. This is a well structured and comprehensive report covering the full range of programmes, and the SEC requires institutional action on issues of a cross-institutional nature that are raised by external examiners.

65   The SEC also receives an annual summary report on feedback from validation and review events prepared by QEU. The feedback is carefully analysed and indicates substantial self-reflection by the University. A common area of concern for 2011-12 was that the checklist for validation was too long and not entirely appropriate for overseas collaborative provision. In response the SEC set up a short-life working group to review and refresh the checklist.

Self-evaluation and management of information

5.1   Key features of the institution's approach

66   The composition of the SEC, which consists of members of academic and professional services units, allows the committee to develop an integrated view of the results of self-evaluative activities across organisational units and levels. Self-evaluation at programme and school level is considered later (see paragraphs 69-71). For professional services, the University has since 2010 carried out service area reviews and, at the time of the current ELIR, reviews had been conducted of library services, student services, and the international student experience.

67   Students are full members of review panels for programmes and support services. Students confirmed that they receive adequate training for their role, and are able to make a constructive contribution to the review process. The ELIR team heard that the large number of surveys in use may contribute to confusion amongst students with respect to the purpose of specific surveys and to survey fatigue. Accordingly, the University is encouraged to continue to review its strategic approach to the management of student surveys, in three respects: first, to provide for consistency in the approach to the external survey of the student experience; second, to review the number and scope of surveys with a view to their possible consolidation; and third to develop an effective system for the collation and synthesis of all student surveys into a coordinated framework of action planning.

68   The University recognises the need to strengthen its capability in the area of data analysis in order to support planning, monitoring and review activities, and has recently appointed a Head of Planning who will coordinate the work in this area. As part of this process, during 2010-11, the student records system was modified to make it possible to provide data on withdrawal and retention, especially for priority groups. The ELIR team endorses the measures that the University is taking to strengthen the functionality of its student records system in order to improve its understanding of the student profile and to enhance planning.

5.2   Commentary on the advance information set

69   The University provided a considerable volume of advance information, as well as various sets of additional information, that allowed the ELIR team to develop a good understanding of the arrangements in place for quality assurance and enhancement. Through the advance information set the team noted that the well designed quality framework was benchmarked against the Quality Code and other external reference points. The advance information set also allowed the team to ascertain that effective arrangements were in place for annual monitoring and review, external examination, validation and review, and gathering student feedback.

70   At school level, the annual monitoring report provides a very thorough review of programme-level monitoring in addition to analysis of feedback from students and other stakeholders (for example external examiners), reflection on key performance indicators, performance against key strategies (for example QELTA), identification of good practice and items for consideration by School Academic Boards and the Student Experience Committee. It also provides an action plan for the coming year, as well as an open and reflective account of progress on the previous action plan. Overall, the ELIR team found that monitoring and review procedures were effective, and that significant positive practice leading to quality enhancement was derived from annual monitoring and review carried out at programme and school level.

71   In 2010-11, a SEC working group recommended a move towards a continuous monitoring model to enhance and supplement the existing arrangements. While the annual reporting process is thorough and working effectively, there is uncertainty within the University on the specific benefits that a move to a continuous online monitoring model would provide. The University should consider in more depth how it might optimise the benefit from online reporting and continuous monitoring within the current arrangements for annual monitoring.

72   From its reading of the advance information set and related discussions, the ELIR team concluded that the University has an effective approach to securing academic standards and to identifying positive practice and enhancement arising from its quality assurance processes. The team considered that the University has achieved an appropriate balance between quality assurance mechanisms and quality enhancement through its annual monitoring and review, validation and periodic review processes.

5.3   Use of external reference points in self-evaluation

73   The University makes use of a wide range of external reference points to inform its self-evaluation processes. Monitoring and review processes at the progamme level refer to the Quality Code, the SFC Guidance on Quality, the SCQF, subject benchmark statements, the results of external surveys, and comparative programme-level information made available through UCAS, HESA and the Key Information Set. The University has been an active participant in the development of the national Enhancement Themes and has used the Themes to support the improvement of various aspects of the student experience, including the Personal Academic Tutor process, longitudinal induction and the formulation of graduate attributes.

5.4   Management of public information

74   Effective arrangements are in place to ensure the accuracy of the information provided in the undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses. The Head of each division approves the programme information contained in the Prospectus, with a view to its publication in both hard copy and on the web, with final approval by the Marketing Officer and the Head of Recruitment and Admissions. Feedback from new students is used on a regular basis to effect further enhancements.

75   Programme handbooks are provided for all programmes, and in accordance with the Quality Code, each School Academic Board is in the process of determining a set of required minimum information for its handbooks. The accuracy of programme handbooks is checked as part of the programme validation and review process.

76   Responsibility for managing the information on top level web pages rests with a dedicated staff member from the Marketing and Communications team, while lower level subject pages are controlled by local web editors nominated by the Heads of their units. The Marketing and Communications Officer approves the contents of web material at the University level, and may consult with unit Heads to ensure the accuracy of material. Web editors are required to develop web information according to standard templates, and to follow the University's style guidelines.

77   The accuracy of publicity material developed by collaborative partners is validated as part of the risk assessment process for collaborative partnerships, while periodic checking is performed by the academic link persons within each programme.

5.5 Effectiveness of the approach to self-evaluation and management of information

78   There is evidence at all levels of the University of a strong culture of self-reflection and action planning which promotes good practice and addresses areas in need of improvement. The University uses its governance and committee framework to support a process of systematic self-evaluation and has effective arrangements in place for the regular and systematic review of its academic programmes and professional services. The planned improvements to the management information system should make a significant contribution to the University's ability to provide focused data in planning, monitoring and review activities, and to aid it in understanding the needs of specific groups within its student population. While effective use is made of individual surveys, the University is encouraged to review its approach to the strategic management of surveys, so that a systematic framework is developed for incorporating survey results from all levels of study into action planning. The University's policies and procedures for managing public information are generally effective.

Collaborative activity

6.1 Key features of the institution's strategic approach

79   For a small institution, the University has a significant number of collaborative partners with nine UK-based and six overseas with the latter largely concentrated in Greece and Singapore; these include validation and franchise arrangements. There has been a rise in overseas enrolments from 998 in 2008-09 to 1,381 in 2011-12. As a result, enrolments in overseas collaborative provision now constitute 21 per cent of the University's total enrolments compared to 17 per cent in 2008-09.

80   Following the 2009 ELIR, a University working group reviewed collaborative practice. Actions resulting from the group's work included clarification of moderation regulations, risk assessment, better communication links with partners and coordination of support for external examiners. Risk assessment templates cover a range of risks including academic, reputational, financial and political. Examples seen by the ELIR team had been carefully compiled but highlighted the difficulty of assessing the political risk where stability at the time of writing can change quickly. For example, minutes of the Joint Board of Studies showed that in Nepal and Pakistan some meetings had to be postponed and, at times, some students could not attend classes. The University revises the risk assessment template annually and the examples given here show the importance of regular monitoring of political risk in particular.

81   Institutional oversight of academic standards in collaborative provision has been the responsibility of school academic boards and the Internationalisation Committee has received summary reports of the annual monitoring of programmes delivered by partners to help determine common themes emerging from partnership programmes. During the Part 2 visit, the ELIR team learned that the Internationalisation Committee was to be discontinued and the summary reports would be considered by the Student Experience Committee. In addition, a new Collaborative Operations Group will monitor collaborative activity. The ELIR team was satisfied that the new arrangements would continue to provide effective oversight of collaborative partnerships.

82   Since the 2009 ELIR, the University has also appointed a Collaborations Development Co-ordinator who reviews, monitors and develops procedures and forms an effective central point of support for collaborative activity. Within schools, at Division level, the Academic Link Person plays a key operational role for collaborative partnerships. The Academic Links share experience and good practice through the informal Academic Link

Forum. The ELIR team learned that, with the restructuring of the Internationalisation Committee, this Forum will take on a more formal role and will become the Collaborations Operations Group in the 2013-14 academic year. The team supports this development, which is likely to provide a recognised channel for communicating positive practice and areas for development to senior institutional committees.

6.2   Securing academic standards of collaborative provision

83   To aid staff involved in collaborative provision, quality assurance procedures have been brought together in the collaborations manual. The ELIR team found this to be a comprehensive and carefully structured document that provided staff with clear guidance on facilitating all aspects of collaborative provision. In 2012 the University strengthened the guidance by providing a module co-ordinator handbook specifically for collaborative partners. The guidance addresses some of the small, perennial problems identified by students and external examiners such as critical reading, referencing and plagiarism, and how students access library, IT and web resources.

84   Overall the ELIR team can confirm that there is a rigorous approval procedure that has been applied consistently. Proposals for new overseas collaborative programmes are initially discussed with the Collaborations Development Co-ordinator, Dean or Head of Division. The formal procedure for establishing a new programme involves gaining institutional approval at two stages from the Portfolio Development Group.

6.3   Enhancing the student learning experience on collaborative programmes

85   A Joint Board of Studies is established for each collaborative programme and this has operational responsibility for maintaining the quality of the programme. The joint boards of studies report to the school academic boards which have overall responsibility for quality. Minutes of these boards and the student staff consultative committee meetings, indicate that discussion and progression of quality assurance procedures, matters and actions is thorough and comparable to that of the University's home-based committees.

86   The University expects its partners to appoint student representatives and to operate formal mechanisms for gathering and responding to student feedback such as module evaluation and annual monitoring of the programme. The ELIR team considered documentation relating to two partners, which indicated that student representation and attention to student matters is well established in the collaborative partnerships.

87   Support for partner staff is provided informally through the academic link staff and the CAP will deliver staff development through workshops on the Edinburgh campus or onsite at the partner. Currently, CAP is developing the capacity to provide staff development for partners through a programme of online 'webinars'.

88   To enhance communication, the University has a Partners area on its website and provides a twice yearly partners' newsletter which highlights positive practice across the partnerships, staff development opportunities and learning technology developments at the Edinburgh campus.

6.4   Effectiveness of the approach to managing collaborative activity

89   The University has effective mechanisms for managing collaborative activity and maintaining the quality and academic standards of the provision, as demonstrated by the open and reflective account of collaborative provision provided in the RA. The University has

reviewed its collaborative practice against the Quality Code and all collaborative provision documentation also makes reference to the Handbook for Practitioners of the Council of Validating Universities.

90   The University has acted rapidly and appropriately on issues raised in external examiners' reports. Where a partner has not responded sufficiently to these plans the University has instigated closure of the programme.

91   The ongoing enhancement of support for staff, both at the University and in the partners, illustrates much positive practice including the establishment of the Academic Link Forum, the staff development activities of the CAP and the proposed introduction of webinars, the partner area on the website, and the partner newsletter.