



Robert Gordon University

Follow-up Report to the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR)

October 2017

Preface

One year after publication of their ELIR Outcome and Technical Reports, institutions are asked to submit a Follow-up Report to QAA Scotland. These reports are also submitted to the Scottish Funding Council. Follow-up Reports are written in the institution's own words and require to be endorsed by the institution's Governing Body prior to publication on the QAA website. Guidance on the content and structure is provided by QAA Scotland.

Institutions are asked to focus on the action they have taken since the review and to include an indication of the effectiveness of that action. ELIR reports highlight positive practice as well as areas for development, and institutions are encouraged to comment on key areas of activity relating to good practice that they have prioritised since the ELIR.

Follow-up Reports are discussed with institutions as part of the ELIR annual discussion meetings. They also form the basis of a follow-up event which involves institutions that were reviewed around the same time coming together to explore the ways they have responded to their ELIR outcomes. This activity is intended to emphasise the enhancement-led nature of the review method.

ENHANCEMENT-LED INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW (ELIR) 2016

FOLLOW-UP REPORT

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Follow-up Report* was executively co-ordinated by the Deputy Principal and Chief Academic Officer, Director of the Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Access (*DELTA*) and the Academic Registrar and Secretary to the Board. The content of the report was discussed and developed at various venues including the *Quality and Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC)* and the annual engagement meeting with *QAA* in January 2017. There was student involvement at *QAEC* and the annual engagement meeting but more specifically through the actions arising from the areas for development identified in the *ELIR* report.

2. ELIR 2016 OUTCOMES

The *Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR)* of Robert Gordon University conducted by the *Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)* was undertaken in March – April 2016. The technical and summary reports of the event were formally published in August 2016.

The overarching judgement about the university was that it had:-

"effective arrangements for managing academic standards and the student learning experience. These arrangements are likely 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".

In addition there were **eight areas of positive practice** identified in the report as follows:-

- *Clarity of vision and strategy*
- *Commitment to widening access*
- *Student representation and partnership working*
- *Employability and approaches to work related experience*
- *Strategic and proactive engagement with the Enhancement Themes*
- *Identifying and sharing good practice*
- *Approach to quality assurance and quality enhancement*
- *Self-evaluation and the effective strategic use of data*

Following the *ELIR* the university has undertaken some significant academic restructuring; these proposals had been identified during the review. In undertaking this restructuring, the university has ensured that the strengths outlined above have been protected and reinforced. Secondly, in the period since the review, the university took the decision to submit for the *Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)*, this was in no small part influenced by the strong evidence base provided by the *ELIR* report which was used in the *TEF* provider submission. The university was extremely pleased to have recently been awarded a *TEF* gold rating and the judgement of the panel reflected evidence of:-

- a systematic approach to engaging students as partners in the development of the learning experience;
- strategic investment in outstanding physical resources which are used by students to enhance learning and progression;
- a comprehensive range of opportunities for students to develop knowledge, skills and understanding that are most highly valued by employers; and
- opportunities for students across the university to engage consistently and frequently with developments at the forefront of professional practice.

Many of the above areas resonated with the outcomes of the *ELIR*.

The university has continued to promote and embed the *positive practice* identified in the report including through:-

- the production of a fourth *Student Partnership Agreement* which includes a new section "achieved in partnership", illustrating the progression from an approach which reported on actions taken in response to student feedback (eg *You Said, We Did*) to one which celebrates the collaborative involvement with students in the design and enhancement from the outset;
- the development of graduate level apprenticeships as part of the continuing commitment to widening access; and
- developing an *Employability Hub* which includes a significant resource investment.

The *ELIR* report also helpfully identified **five areas for development** and an update on these is provided in section 3 of this report.

3. RECENT UNIVERSITY DEVELOPMENTS

Before commenting on actions taken in respect of the *five areas for development* by the *ELIR* team, an overview is provided of some key relevant developments at institutional level, which have occurred since the review. These include:-

- A major *academic restructuring* was implemented at the start of Session 2016/17 which involved the replacement of the existing three Faculty-based structure, with constituent Schools or Departments, with a School-based structure comprising eleven academic Schools and a Graduate School. Within the revised structure there was greater delegated authority afforded to the Heads of School and an intent to achieve closer engagement/interaction between the Executive and the academic activity of the university. As part of this restructuring there were a number of associated developments:-

- the Deputy Principal assumed the role of 'Chief Academic Officer' with previous institutional responsibility for academic quality and development, teaching, learning and access extended to include student experience. To support this increased portfolio and to compensate for the loss of the three Deans of Faculty who had delegated responsibility for academic quality and standards within their respective faculties, a new role of 'Assistant Chief Academic Officer' was established;
- the previous Faculty Quality Officers were retitled Academic Quality Officers, each assigned to a number of Schools and operating in an executive support role to the relevant Heads of School in respect of academic quality and standards; and
- other relevant changes within the context of this report included the appointment of a Director of Student Life (to replace the former Dean of Students) and the appointment of a Director of *DELTA* and a Director of Academic Administration.

Although the changes have been in place for less than a year there is already demonstrable evidence that the revised arrangements have led to the anticipated enhancements including faster decision-making and even more consistent implementation of institutional policies and practices.

- The university has *reconstituted a number of its committees* essentially to ensure wider and more strategic engagement of appropriate staff, for example, all Heads of School are now members of the Academic Development Committee. Student membership has increased on a number of the university's key committees, notably the Learning Infrastructure Sub-Committee and Teaching and Learning Assessment Sub-Committee. Student School Officers have been appointed which reflects an extension of the commitment to student partnership. The Faculty Quality Enhancement Sub-Committees have been replaced by the *Network for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (NETL)* which operates at an institution-wide level.
- A major *academic roles review project* has been undertaken which had two strategically important objectives:-
 - to review academic roles in light of the revision of the university strategy, and the changing HE environment, to ensure the university's continued ability to perform strongly within the sector; and
 - to address acknowledged weaknesses in academic career opportunities within the university.

The primary outcome of the project is the development of a career progression structure that offers three different routes to advancement. Most notably, it introduces an annual application process that allows any member of academic staff to seek to apply for progression from grade 7 (i.e. entry level lecturer scale) right through to professorship.

The principal benefits of the progression structure and revised role descriptors are as follows:-

- the significant expansion of career progression opportunities for academic staff through the revision of the grade structure and the introduction of an annual application process, consistent with best practice in the HE sector;
- the explicit equal valuing of teaching and research, along with commercialisation and knowledge exchange which may result from either of these two core activities;
- roles and role expectations which have been updated to reflect contemporary university and sector contexts;

- the incentivisation of staff through the introduction of performance-related pay for grade 8 staff and course leaders;
- the full integration of grade 7 into the academic structure, opening up entry routes and giving progression opportunity for early-career academics, whilst maintaining competitiveness in the market place;
- the mapping of roles against the *UK Professional Standards Framework*, supporting progression and continuing professional development;
- ambiguities about expectations of those with titular awards is removed through a shift from award of title to clear titular roles;
- explicit integration of research fellows and senior fellows within the university's academic grading structure (aligning with the 'research only' *national academic role profiles (NARPs)*); and
- the establishment of a clear relationship between roles and university KPIs, leading to clear and transparent lines of responsibility and accountability.

The project will undergo phased implementation from Session 2017/18.

4. ELIR AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

With regard to the **five areas for development** identified by the *ELIR* team, the university shared progress with addressing these at its annual engagement meeting with QAA on 31 January 2017. The following update is provided:-

Consistency of practice in assessment and feedback

Following the Review, the university's Teaching, Learning and Assessment Sub-Committee led the development of recommendations to enhance consistency of practice in assessment and feedback. These recommendations have now been endorsed and are being implemented by Schools for commencement of Session 2017/18. In particular, the measures will enhance the student experience by:-

- reducing pockets of variability;
- implementing identified good practice across the university; and
- enhancing clarity of feedback timescales.

Student partnership – including student interns - played a significant role in this work and assessment and feedback was a key theme in the 2016/17 *Student Partnership Agreement*. Assessment and feedback also provided the theme of the 2017 university-wide Teaching and Learning Conference.

A key outcome of this focused work, has been a decision to build on existing effective practice in online submission, marking and return of feedback to extend this across the university. To this end, a major project has commenced which will engage all of the university's schools in moving to online submission over a period of 24 months.

This work is being led by *DELTA*, in partnership with the university's schools, and will report to the university's Teaching, Learning and Assessment Sub-Committee. Importantly, the work will incorporate an evaluation element throughout to both chart learning through the

project and ensure enhancement impact across the university. This evaluation will incorporate:

- engagement with students and staff; and,
- analysis of quantitative and qualitative data arising from both the university's core PI dataset (e.g. student evaluation questionnaire results pertaining to assessment) and from the new online assessment management systems being introduced.

Graduate School

The university's approach to supporting postgraduate research students (PGR) led to the implementation of a single Graduate School from the start of the academic session 2016-17. The Graduate School's primary aim is to improve the postgraduate research student experience. Other objectives are to support the growth of institutional research outputs and contribute to improved performance in REF2021. To achieve this, the Graduate School interfaces with the 11 host academic Schools to support their PGR students and research priorities. Operation of the new Graduate School provides a more unified and consistent experience for all new and existing PGR students, thereby promoting a vibrant research culture. The following describes some of its key activities:-

- With student experience significantly influenced by the quality of supervision received, a review and updating of institutional *support for PGR student supervisors* has been completed:
 - *initial supervisor training* workshops have been revised and are now delivered entirely by the Graduate School;
 - the *ongoing training for experienced supervisors* has evolved into a series of topical and thematic lunchtime seminars and workshops delivered over the academic year, covering areas such as supervision of part-time distance-based PGRs, supervision of colleagues who are PGRs, and progress and Tier 4 monitoring;
 - to further support *less-experienced supervisors*, discussions have been held with *DELTA* to introduce a more structured form of mentorship within the supervisory teams, wherein experience can be shared between supervisors.
- Acknowledging the aspirations for many PGR students to pursue careers in academia and potentially in a teaching role, the Graduate School is promoting the opportunities for all students to undertake *demonstrating/teaching*, in line with Research Council Training Grant guidance and conditions.
- A review of the *PgCert Research Methods* course, that is compulsory for all PhD students, has commenced in order to re-evaluate the university's approach to supporting PGR student development in research methodology and related studies. A newly constituted course management team, comprising a representative nominated by the Head for each of the 11 academic Schools, has been established to take this review forward and discussions are moving toward consideration of a more bespoke and tailored delivery. The timescale for completion is summer 2018.
- A review of the system for *annual progress monitoring* has also been completed, and for session 2017-18 the university will be moving from an annual to a six-monthly period for assessing academic progress, thereby assisting with the early identification of problems and improving PGR completions within the normal registration period.
- In respect of *periodic review* of the university's research degree provision, the Graduate School will undergo a *Research Degree Internal Review (RDIR)* in early/mid-2018 (5 years since last RDIR in Session 2012-13). Evolved from the previous RDIR process, this

will appraise the research student experience with the focus on the Graduate School as a single entity, and its collaboration with the 11 academic Schools. It will provide a formal opportunity to evaluate the extent to which the Graduate School is contributing to a more consistent postgraduate research student experience and a stronger research culture and community. Early discussions and preparations are in progress.

- The university has implemented *24 hour access* for PGR students, subject to clear limitations, from the summer of 2017 and only in the Sir Ian Wood Building; whilst this is not the normal day-time place of work for all students, the facility provides round the clock access to office functions.
- The university participated in the *Vitae Three Minute Thesis competition 2017* to showcase how PGR research work supports efforts to build a more robust research culture, and the university's winner entered the national semi-final held in July 2017.
- The 12th *Annual Student Congress*, a three day residential programme delivered at The Burn, was held in mid-May 2017 to deliver the *Vitae Developing Researcher* programme. Nearly 30 students attended and excellent feedback was received.

Support for online distance learners

Following the review, *DELTA* led development work to identify a number of enhancement actions to improve the online learning experience. This work brought together students and staff to reflect upon the challenges faced by distance learning students, together with agreeing practical steps which could be taken to further enhance the support for online distance learners.

This led to the development and publication of an *RGU Baseline for Online Learning* which provides a key reference point for colleagues across the university. Accompanying this, a diagnostic audit of online distance learning courses has been completed and the outcomes of this will be used with course teams through 2017/18 to enhance and improve the online distance learning student experience.

The *Baseline* is also enabling *DELTA* to re-align and update its staff development provision in online and distance learning, to ensure maximum impact through this work.

Evaluating the impact of the *Baseline*, and the subsequent actions being undertaken, will be important. To this end, *DELTA* has agreed with Heads of School that further diagnostic auditing will take place in due course to identify both positive practice and any areas for further development and enhancement. Most significantly, the *Baseline* itself will be subject to review and this work will be overseen by the Director of Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Access.

Role of Learning Enhancement Co-ordinators and Teaching Fellows

As highlighted above, a *major academic roles review* project has been underway within the university.

The review has placed an emphasis on all colleagues having responsibility for quality assurance and enhancement, with clear delineation of responsibilities by grade.

Importantly, the review recognised the key role course leaders play in supporting assurance and enhancement across the university. Accordingly, the course leader role has been re-developed and will include a performance-related pay element in recognition of the significance of these roles.

In considering titular roles, it has been agreed that the learning enhancement co-ordinator and teaching fellow roles will be replaced by a new teaching excellence fellow role. These new fellow roles will be open to all academic colleagues and be introduced as part of the phased implementation of the review outcomes.

Collaborative Provision

Institutional responsibility for collaborative activity has been established within the Commercialisation and Regional Innovation executive portfolio. Protocols have now been developed and approved for:-

- the approval and ongoing development of institutional Partnership Agreements relating to advanced entry to RGU courses;
- the approval of Trans-National Education (TNE) partnership arrangements.

Standard proformas and associated guidance for staff have been developed and are available for full implementation from session 2017-18.

The Dean of Student Recruitment has lead responsibility for advanced entry partnership agreements, while the Director of Business Development has lead responsibility for TNE contracts.

The university will review with key stakeholders the effectiveness of these revised processes at the end of session.

5. GOVERNING BODY ENDORSEMENT

Prior to the submission to the *Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education* and the *Scottish Funding Council*, this report was endorsed by the Board of Governors at its meeting on 5 October 2017.

_____ *Michelle Fleming*

(Chair of the Board of Governors)

_____ *5th October 2017*

(date)

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