

Enhancement-led Institutional Review of Robert Gordon University

Technical Report

April 2021



Contents

About the Enhancement-led Institutional Review method	1
About this review	1
The impact of COVID-19	1
About this report	1
Threshold judgement about Robert Gordon University	3
1 Contextual information about the institution, student population and the review	3
2 Enhancing the student learning experience	6
3 Strategy and practice for enhancing learning and teaching	20
4 Academic standards and quality processes	27
5 Collaborative provision	33

About the Enhancement-led Institutional Review method

The QAA website explains the method for [Enhancement-led Institutional Review \(ELIR\)](#) and has links to the ELIR handbook and other informative documents.¹ You can also find out more about the [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education \(QAA\)](#).²

Further details about ELIR can be found in an accompanying [brief guide](#),³ including an overview of the review method, information about review teams, and explanations of follow-up action.

About this review

This is the Technical Report of the ELIR conducted by QAA at Robert Gordon University. The review took place as follows: Planning Visit on 16 and 17 February 2021 and Review Visit on 26-30 April 2021. The review was conducted by a team of five reviewers:

- Ms Karen Barton (Academic Reviewer)
- Mr Alexander Hedlund (Student Reviewer)
- Professor David Lamburn (Academic Reviewer)
- Mr Tony Platt (Coordinating Reviewer)
- Professor Valerie Webster (Academic 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.

The impact of COVID-19

QAA made some amendments to the ELIR process to accommodate the ongoing pandemic, most notable of which was that the ELIR was conducted entirely online. The ELIR was undertaken while the pandemic, and the institution's response to it, was a key part of the context. Although this was part of the context of the review, the team considered the institution's approach to quality and standards from the time of the last ELIR in 2016. It is acknowledged that the review took place at what was a very challenging time, and the ELIR team and QAA Scotland are grateful to staff and students for their engagement in the review.

About this report

In this report, the ELIR team:

- delivers a threshold 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 threshold judgement can be found on page 3, followed by the detailed findings of the review given in numbered paragraphs.

Technical Reports set out the ELIR team's view under each of the report headings. Shorter Outcome Reports are provided that set out the main findings of the ELIR for a wider

¹ About ELIR:

www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/en/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review

² About QAA: www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland

³ Brief Guide to ELIR: www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/reports/brief-guide-to-elir-method.pdf

audience. The [Outcome Report](#) for this review is on the QAA website.⁴

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

⁴ Outcome Report:
www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/The-Robert-Gordon-University

Threshold judgement about Robert Gordon University

Robert Gordon University has **effective** arrangements for managing academic standards and the student learning experience.

This is a positive judgement, which means that the University meets sector expectations in securing the academic standards of its awards and enhancing the quality of the student learning experience it provides, currently and into the future. This judgement confirms there can be public confidence in the University's awards and in the quality of the learning experience it provides for its students.

1 Contextual information about the institution, student population and the review

1.1 Summary information about the institution

1 Robert Gordon University (RGU) can trace its roots back over 250 years and was established as a university in 1992 when the Robert Gordon Institute of Technology was awarded university status. The University has a clear mission to transform people and communities by providing teaching and research which is demand-led, contributing to economic, social and cultural development not only regionally but also nationally and internationally. Through its relationships with professional bodies and employers, it develops a curriculum that addresses specific skills needs and through its provision seeks to drive employability and to support individuals throughout their professional careers.

2 The University states its purpose, through its Strategy Map (see paragraph 4), to be an innovative, inclusive, impactful, professionally-focused institution. It aims to ensure a high-quality student experience through active engagement with students in the design and delivery of the curriculum. The University creates an inclusive environment through a student-centred approach to the learning experience.

3 A major academic restructuring was implemented at the start of 2016-17, replacing the existing three faculty-based structure with its constituent schools or departments, with a school-based structure comprising 11 academic schools and a Graduate School. The purpose of this restructure was to facilitate greater authority to Heads of School and to achieve a closer engagement and interaction between the University's Executive and its academic activity. It also provides greater agility in decision-making. In 2016, the role of Assistant Chief Academic Officer was created, undertaking some of the roles of the previous three Deans of faculty. In 2018, the role expanded to incorporate the role of Secretary to the Board, subsuming the role of Academic Registrar and Secretary to the Board.

4 The University's strategic plan at the time of the 2016 ELIR was 'A Clear Future for a Leading University in a New Era'. A revised university strategy was launched in 2018, expressed in a Strategy Map which sets a clear framework for all aspects of university business - identifying purpose, mission, culture aims and enablers as well as the key performance indicators (KPIs). The Strategy Map includes a culture statement: that RGU will thrive by valuing and celebrating a culture of authenticity, approachability, collaboration, innovation, ambition and respectfulness. This culture has developed a resilient staff community which has enabled the University to respond to recent environmental challenges including the Black Lives Matter movement and the COVID-19 pandemic.

5 The University Business Plan normally spans a three-year period (currently 2019-20 to 2021-22). All academic schools and professional and support departments develop school/departmental plans which feed into, map onto and are informed by the Business Plan. Targets for the University's performance against its KPIs are outlined within the

Business Plan, and the Plan has been developed in tandem with a revised High-Level Risk register and three-year financial forecast. The Risk Appetite Statement is reviewed annually. Performance against the Business Plan is monitored within the University and reported to the Board of Governors.

6 Leadership is centrally provided by the Executive, the composition of which was extended when the new Principal began office in 2020. The Executive, supported by senior managers such as Heads of School and Directors and heads of professional and support departments, make up the University Management Group (UMG) which meets on a regular basis. The committee membership was reconstituted in 2017 to include wider staff representation and student membership for a number of key committees. Following the institutional-led periodic review of the Navitas (who run the International College at RGU) partnership there is a clear link between the University's committee structure and that of the International College at RGU (ICRGU). These and other revised arrangements have been designed to create enhancements including faster decision-making and more consistent implementation of institutional policies and practices.

7 The University coordinated its response to the COVID-19 pandemic through two groups established for the purpose: a Teaching and Learning Group and, for returning to campus, a Campus Enabling Group. Both groups included a Student President as a member. This was to enable decisions of the group to be directly informed through the provision of feedback gathered through the student representative arrangements and to communicate decisions back to the student body. The University was able to benefit from its existing widespread practice in the deployment of the virtual learning environment to improve the student experience and apply this to the challenges presented by the pandemic. All teaching resumed online one week after the imposition of the first lockdown in March 2020. Remote assessment at all stages of each course was arranged and completed successfully. Quality processes were adapted where necessary to ensure that any modifications of module delivery or assessment were successfully planned and reported to the relevant assessment boards. All student support services were effectively moved online and maintained and adapted as appropriate. Special arrangements were introduced to replicate industrial and business placements where necessary and online programmes were developed to support existing and start-up businesses and enable them to adapt to the challenges presented by the pandemic. Arrangements are in place to enable a return to (or in some cases a move to) blended learning post-pandemic.

1.2 Composition and key trends in the student population

8 The University, as of October 2020, had a total of 15,779 students (headcount) of whom 10,965 were full-time students and 4,814 were studying part-time. Of these students, 11,608 were classified as home students, 3,482 were overseas students and 686 were RUK students. Undergraduate students totalled 9,164 full-time and 782 part-time. There were 1,615 full-time postgraduate taught (PGT) students and 3,887 were part-time. Of the postgraduate research (PGR) students, 186 were full-time and 145 part-time. Of the overall total student population, 11,479 were on-campus students and 4,300 were online students. A significant number of the online students (3,233) were postgraduate taught students. The 2018-19 HESA figures showed the University to be the third largest UK provider of online learning master's courses where over 30 online degree options are offered.

9 Notwithstanding the strategic aim to grow student numbers, a small decline was recorded in recent years from a total of 16,074 students in 2015-16 to 15,776 students in 2019-20. This was particularly evident in postgraduate numbers due in part to the decline in the oil and gas sector.

10 The University has a larger percentage of female undergraduate students than the

Scottish average as 63% of first-degree students were female compared with 37% male (the average for the Scottish sector is currently 58.8% female and 41.2% male). Corresponding figures for postgraduate research students were almost equal at 49.8% female and 50.2% male; while 56.2% of postgraduate taught students were female and 43.8% male. There is a significant gender imbalance in favour of female students in nursing, midwifery and health sciences although this is balanced to some extent by the number of male undergraduates in engineering and computer science. Various gender imbalance initiatives have been undertaken at subject level (see paragraph 33). The University has an increasing population of black and minority ethnic students across all three levels of study, exceeding the Scottish average, particularly among postgraduate taught and research students (the University figure is 14% and 13.4% respectively against the sector average of 6.8% and 6.5%).

11 The University is committed to widening access and this is reflected in the comparatively large number of Scottish-domiciled undergraduate entrants from the 20% most deprived postcodes, as defined in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD20). The number and proportion of MD20 students has seen a slight decline overall from 163 (7.2%) in 2014-15, to 157 in 2018-19, compared with the Scottish sector average which has risen from 14.1% to 15.3% in that timeframe. The retention of MD20 students has constantly been above the Scottish national average and, in 2018-19, this was 89.4% compared with national figure of 86.3%. The University's key college partner, North East Scotland College (NESCol), provides a large cohort of articulating students who enrol with enhanced standing each year.

1.3 Commentary on the preparation for the ELIR

12 Preparations for ELIR were overseen by a Steering Group, led by Assistant Chief Academic Officer and included the Deputy Principal and Vice-Principal for Academic Development, the Student President (Education and Welfare) and the Student Union Manager. Following an ELIR Preparation event facilitated by QAA, the Steering Group met regularly and identified that the thematic context for ELIR 2021 would be built upon the Strategy Map work. This work had identified significant strengths that had made the University distinctive: graduate employability, delivery of workforce learning, and a university committed to widening access.

13 The Steering Group identified four core underlying themes around how the University operates to ensure a focus on high-quality teaching, learning and assessment, and these were contextualised in the Reflective Analysis as:

- student partnership at the core of decisions and at the heart of the institution
- using data to enhance provision and student experience
- widening access
- employability.

14 The themes having been adopted by Academic Council were then shared and discussed throughout the university committee structure and in open staff sessions and student partnership sessions. The review documentation provided by the institution and the discussions with staff and students, enabled the ELIR team to confirm that these themes represent the key aspects of Robert Gordon University as an institution.

15 Drafting of the Reflective Analysis (RA) was overseen by the Steering Group. Staff and students, including the three Student Presidents and the Student Union Manager, contributed to and commented on the RA. General staff engagement sessions were held on the ELIR themes and the process, followed by focus groups which submitted further inputs to the RA. The RA was considered by the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC) prior to publication.

1.4 Summary of the institution's follow-up to the previous ELIR

16 The University has taken action to address the five areas for development identified in the 2016 ELIR. The work to address the recommendation to enhance consistency of practice in assessment and feedback was led by the Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Access (DELTA) and overseen by the University's Teaching, Learning and Assessment Sub-Committee. Of the eight areas of positive practice identified in ELIR 2016, four of these link directly to the contextualised themes identified for the current ELIR.

1.5 Impact of engaging students in ELIR preparations

17 Students at the University were closely involved in the preparations for ELIR. The Student President (Education and Welfare) and the Student Union Manager were members of the ELIR Steering Group. In addition, the University sought student input through focus groups.

18 The ELIR team considered the University's approach to engaging its students in preparations for ELIR to have been effective. During discussions with the ELIR team students described how they had been involved with ELIR preparations from the beginning of the process. They had been supported and provided with documentation explaining the ELIR method and process. Students had been involved in drafting the Reflective Analysis and changes raised by the students had been incorporated into the final document. Students confirmed that the contextualised themes resonated with them and they felt proud of the way that the University and the Students' Union (RGU:Union) had worked together throughout the ELIR preparations.

2 Enhancing the student learning experience

2.1 Student representation and engagement

19 The University has a well-established and effective approach to working in partnership with students and the RGU:Union. Students' views are central to University decision-making and contribute to strategy development and implementation. During the review visits, the ELIR team met staff and students who gave examples of this including: the university-wide project that aimed to standardise and enhance approaches to student assessment and feedback; experience of online learning students pre-Covid; and a refocus on equality and diversity being shaped by student feedback.

20 The role of Director of Student Life was created in 2016 as part of the University restructure. This role assumed operational leadership and management of student services with the aim of driving forward the student experience and had particular responsibility for linking the University with RGU:Union. Students and staff who met with the ELIR team reported strong and effective partnership working reinforced by both parties' ongoing commitment to the Partnership Agreement. The Student Partnership Agreement (SPA) is jointly owned by RGU:Union and the University and includes annual objectives agreed collectively.

Student representation

21 There are well-established formal and informal liaison opportunities which support close working between the University Executive, academic schools, professional service departments, the RGU:Union, and students with student representatives appointed at course and school levels. School-level appointments (Student School Officer) are open to both undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) students although many are held by

undergraduate students (at the time of the current ELIR, 10 of the 11 schools had undergraduate Student School Officers (SSOs) while one school had a postgraduate SSO). Each academic school has as a minimum of one SSO who works in partnership with school senior leadership and staff, liaising with class representatives. The SSO also works on a mutually-agreed school-based enhancement project (see paragraph 26). School activity is reported through the School Academic Board Annual Appraisal Report (see paragraphs 25, 77-79 and 91). Joint meetings between staff and student representatives are arranged to discuss student feedback received through formal and informal mechanisms and any data related to the feedback. Students who met the ELIR team reported very positively on the range of both formal and informal opportunities available to SSOs, student representatives and students including the opportunity to liaise with Executive Board members as well as programme and support staff. The ELIR team would commend the effective partnership working at the University (see paragraphs 27 and 69).

22 At the time of the current ELIR, there were five student governors on Academic Council drawn from the Students' Union, undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research student communities. Student governors are inducted into the role and supported by the Department of Governance and Academic Quality. The opportunities to hear the student voice and to have student representation are the same for the university international partnership programmes as the home provision. In addition, the international student representatives work with the Student Vice-President (International) to raise feedback and to work on specific projects, ensuring the student voice is heard and acted upon. Similar formal and informal mechanisms are in place for those students studying Graduate Apprenticeships and for distance learners. PGR students' representation is managed through the Graduate School whose primary focus is to enhance postgraduate research students' experience and performance. PGR students who met the ELIR team indicated that the representative practice and structure was effective and responsive.

23 There are three elected Student President positions (sabbaticals) with remit for: education and welfare; communications and democracy; and sport and physical activity. The sabbatical officers with the elected vice-presidents form the RGU:Union Executive Committee. RGU:Union in partnership with the Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA) manages the student representative system and provides training to circa 400 student representatives annually. Training sessions are run each semester and focus on representation as well as including the University approach to partnership working with students and the importance of both formal and informal mechanisms for providing feedback at all levels and across all departments and functions. Evidence shows that student representatives found the training to be effective. An online representative's forum is used to support student representatives. The Graduate School has made school representative sessions an integral part of the Researcher Development Training. These sessions are open to all PGR students and provide regular informal opportunities for students to discuss and feed back on their learning experience. PGR students also have formal opportunities to feed back on their learning experience - for example, through the Internal Postgraduate Research Experience Survey.

Responding to the student voice

24 Students who met the ELIR team reported a strong ethos of partnership working between students and the University where the student voice impacts positively at programme level, through the committee structure, in strategy development and in shaping student enhancement activities (school and university wide). The student voice is also heard at the University Board of Governors' level through two student governor appointments (UG and PG). Students are active and equal members of the key university committees, and of the School Academic Boards. Student membership has been increased on a number of the University's key committees, notably the Academic Regulations Sub-Committee (ARSC) and

the Learning Infrastructure Sub-Committee (LISC).

25 The University has a well-established and understood policy and practice in relation to annual appraisal of taught provision (see paragraphs 77-79 and 91) and students are central to the data collection process. Schools use a range of information including Annual Course Appraisal Reports; data gathered from the data dashboard system (RGU Insights); survey outputs; qualitative student feedback; and notes, feedback and actions from Student Staff Liaison Committee. These data feed into subsequent school discussions along with direct feedback received from school and class representatives, external examiner reports and professional services feedback to enable schools to reflect on the past year and to develop a School Academic Board Appraisal Report which contains an Action and Enhancement Plan. The Annual Appraisal Reports and Action and Enhancement Plans are reviewed and discussed at School Academic Boards of which the Student School Officer is a member. Implementation of the Action and Enhancement Plans and the RGU Learning and Teaching Framework are clearly linked to the School's Learning and Teaching plans; these are monitored by School Academic Boards and overseen at university level by QAEC.

26 Academic Quality Officers (AQOs) provide SSOs with specific support for Annual Appraisal and School Academic Boards. The AQOs meet each SSO individually to go through their school's data dashboards for Annual Appraisal at both course and school level to support students to be able to review, consider and interrogate the qualitative and quantitative data. Student School Officers and Sabbaticals who met the ELIR team reported that these sessions were very helpful and were conducted in a collegiate manner which enabled students to feel they could question and challenge the data. As a result of student feedback and the annual appraisal process, school enhancement projects emerge in addition or complementary to the university-wide enhancement projects. Student representatives are fully involved in agreeing and leading the school-level enhancement projects. All projects have students as part of the working groups as well as being consulted at various stages in the project. Following the consideration of annual appraisal data at course and school levels, the Vice-Principal for Academic Development and Student Experience and the Assistant Chief Academic Officer and relevant Academic Quality Officer meet with each Head of School to discuss respective School Academic Board Appraisal Reports. There is demonstrable engagement in the Annual Appraisal Process by the Heads of School. Summaries of the meetings with Heads are reviewed by the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC) and institutional level actions and enhancements are then taken forward, supported by DELTA. These meetings assist the University in maintaining institutional oversight and in identifying emerging enhancement themes and good practice. University priorities that aim to further enhance the student experience can emerge from any of these committees or groups, for consideration by the University.

27 The ELIR team learned that staff and students valued, not only the formal mechanisms for giving and receiving feedback, but also the informal mechanisms which had been developed through an embedded partnership culture where students and the RGU:Union feel able to raise issues or concerns at any point in the semester. Not waiting for end-of-module evaluations, which were seen by some students as less valuable due to the retrospective nature of these surveys, allowed staff to respond quickly to resolve any issues. It was evident from discussions with students that they valued the supportive and engaged culture at the University. The School of Computing created both formal and informal processes to facilitate wider discussions with staff and students centred on the Student Evaluation Questionnaire (SEQ) results which were viewed positively by the ELIR team.

28 The Step Change team in DELTA work closely with schools and professional support services to coordinate institutional learning, teaching and student experience projects. Local and institutional projects are identified on an annual basis as part of the annual appraisal process but may span several academic sessions depending on the scope

of the project. An example of projects includes the RGU Baseline online learning project (see paragraph 82). As part of ongoing enhancement activity, work is being coordinated through Governance and Academic Quality to expand and integrate data related to student services into the RGU Insights database to allow data from all aspects of the student experience to be easily accessed and considered. The use of data to inform decision making at all levels was clearly demonstrated to the ELIR team.

29 The ELIR team confirmed that the University had an effective approach to gathering and responding to the student voice through a variety of processes: Student Experience Questionnaires and closing feedback loop; internal pulse surveys; internal research survey; national surveys, including the National Student Survey (NSS); Internal Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (IPRES); Student AGM and Ask RGU platforms as well as through informal mechanisms directly with staff. Students are made aware of actions taken in response to their feedback through a variety of methods. At module level these are communicated through staff-student liaison meeting updates, posting information in the virtual learning environment (VLE) and through class representatives. School Action Plans are considered at School Academic Boards and the information cascaded by Student School Officers to the student representatives. This cascade approach also applies through the committee structure where representatives - for example, on QAEC - not only feed into discussions and decision-making but are expected to feedback to their constituents. University student and staff communication channels including social media are used to disseminate key enhancement activities and outcomes.

30 Based on the evidence, the ELIR team commends the University for a genuine culture of effective collaboration, between the University and the student body, which is embedded through both formal and informal mechanisms at all levels of the institution. The student voice is actively sought, valued and acted upon across the University (see paragraphs 21, 25, 29 and 69).

2.2 Recognising and responding to equality and diversity in the student population

Equality and diversity

31 Although the University has a range of approaches aimed at supporting equality and diversity, including working with local partners such as NHS Grampian, the University has identified equality and diversity structures and activity as needing further development. In August 2020, the University took steps to enhance the focus on equality and diversity through replacing the Equality and Diversity Advisory Group with a formal sub-committee of QAEC. The Equality and Diversity Sub-Committee is responsible for leading, monitoring and evaluating equality and diversity activity. The Student President (Education and Welfare) and Student Vice-President (Welfare) are core members of the sub-committee. In addition, a new Equality and Diversity Forum has been established to inform the work of the committee and the University aims to embed equality and diversity at all levels of annual appraisal. The new structure seeks to bring together various strands of work and enable impact to be assessed and responded to strategically. Staff and student Equality Champions have been established in the areas of age, disability, gender, sexual orientation, and race, religion and belief. The student Equality Champions work in partnership with RGU:Union to raise awareness and provide leadership for the equality strand being championed. In addition, the University is creating a new role in HR for an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Adviser that will work alongside the existing structure of fair treatment advisers. Equality and Diversity Sub-Committee members have raised the need for further training and the University is considering the most appropriate additional training resources for staff.

32 The new approach seeks to ensure strong institutional oversight, bringing together the various work strands of equality and diversity and to share internal and sector developments and best practice. The ELIR team learned that this work continued to be a priority for the University but the approach they are moving forward with was, at the time of the current ELIR, at an early stage since this was the first academic session with the new structure in place. The majority of staff and students who met the ELIR team were unaware of the equality and diversity work that was taking place within the institution. Therefore, based on the evidence, the ELIR team recommends that the University continues to develop and embed equality, diversity and inclusion strategy, actions and practices throughout all aspects of university activity and monitor the impact, ensuring that there is ownership and understanding among staff and students.

33 The University recognises there is a significant gender imbalance in its student population with a larger than the sector average percentage of female undergraduate students (see paragraph 10). This is mainly due to a small number of discipline areas having significant gender imbalance - Nursing, Midwifery and Health Sciences which have a high proportion of female students (in line with the sector) and Engineering and Computing which have high proportion of male students. The University has implemented a number of initiatives at university and discipline levels as part of its Institutional Gender Action Plan (iGAP) (for example, Men Can Care, Women in Architecture and Construction) to narrow this imbalance. The Institutional Gender Action Plan has clear timelines, actions and owners from across the institution and is formally monitored, twice per year, through the Equality and Diversity Sub-Committee and Executive Board, before going to Board of Governors. The University has set key targets regarding programme imbalance - for example, 75% of more than one gender is halved by 2025-26 and that the overall male-female gap is narrowed. Monitoring of gender actions is also a feature of the annual appraisal process.

34 The University collects data in relation to protected characteristics and the wider equality and diversity agenda. Equalities data for 2019-20 identified withdrawal rates for those students with a declared disability was higher than any other category of students. Overall, retention had dropped for all protected characteristics except disability. The continuation rate for those who declared a disability is 88.8% compared to 89.6% for those students who do not declare a disability. Disabled student satisfaction was lower in some discipline areas of the University. Recognising the small numbers in some disciplines, local actions are developed and monitored as part of the annual appraisal process. QAEC and the Equality and Diversity Sub-Committee consider data relating to all protected characteristics and student performance and feeds into action planning. The Inclusion Centre provides confidential support to students with a wide range of disabilities including dyslexia screening and evaluation. The service continued to operate throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in the online environment.

35 The University's population of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students exceeds the Scottish sector average. For first-degree students, 8.3% of students were BAME (compared with a sector average of 7.7%). The percentage of BAME students was larger in the postgraduate student community with 13.4% at postgraduate research level (compared with a sector average of 6.5%) and 14% at postgraduate taught level (compared with a sector average of 6.8%) with strong recruitment from West Africa. The ELIR team noted the positive, ongoing higher levels of BAME student recruitment across programmes and the strong retention rates for BAME students - 89.4% compared to 88.9% for white students. At the time of the current ELIR, university figures showed attainment gaps within some of the protected characteristics - for example, Asian students' 'good honours' were below the university average. The ELIR team would encourage the University to continue to make attainment data and planned actions clearly available to committees and teams across the institution to ensure action planning is clearly understood and monitored.

36 Working in partnership with students and the Students' Union, there is a heightened commitment to tackling racism and decolonising the curriculum. The ELIR team heard from student sabbaticals of the positive responses made by the University in listening to BAME students and the commitment to working in partnership to tackle issues. A number of key events and commitments have been made including the University signing the Advance HE sector anti-racism pledge, Black History month in 2020, and RGU:Union's Black liberation Group established a project developed with staff and students to examine and inform the Social Work curriculum.

Widening participation

37 The University has a long-established commitment to widening participation and has embedded support systems to facilitate students to succeed. Widening participation and inclusion remain key strategic objectives of the University as outlined in the University Strategy Map. During 2019, the University developed an approach focused on promoting and implementing 'Access Excellence'. This approach - 'ACCESS RGU' - targets individuals who are underrepresented in higher education including MD20, care experienced learners and Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP) schools. ACCESS RGU seeks to support the recruitment, transition and achievement of learners from diverse backgrounds and circumstances, removing barriers and raising aspirations. Free ACCESS RGU Enrolment Support Packs are distributed to eligible students at the start of the first semester. The pack comprises financial goods (including accommodation discounts, book vouchers and travel vouchers) to aid the learner in areas such as living costs, digital technology and travel, all enabling a smooth transition to university.

38 The University has a strong track record in enabling students with higher national qualifications to enter with advanced standing and supports around 400 students annually. An embedded partnership with NESCOL is central to RGU's approach to college articulation and has informed the University's new College Engagement Strategy. To further embed partnership working, a representative from NESCOL is included in Academic Development Committee membership. In seeking to expand the number of articulating students and particularly those from MD20 backgrounds, the University's new College Engagement Strategy was developed to establish new agreements with colleges from other regions, expanding the number and focus of qualifications recognised. These have focused mainly on disciplines where recruitment to NESCOL has been traditionally lower. The University runs an Associate Student Scheme to support transitions and allow college students to access university resources. During the review visits, the ELIR team met students who confirmed the benefits of the associate student scheme.

39 A strong emphasis on regional recruitment limits the available pool of local MD20 students. The proportion of Scottish domiciled MD20 students has dropped slightly in recent years but the University has taken steps to address this decline through refreshed outreach activities such as the Gray's Mobile Art School, extending the SHEP work to SHEP schools outside the region, and the Access To programme. The University recognises that despite high levels of participation in outreach activities, conversion to enrolments remains a challenge with approximately 50% of participants applying to the University. The University continues to develop transition and outreach activities to enhance the student experience and increase conversion rates. Specific support arrangements have been developed to support students who are estranged from parents or carers and students who are care experienced students, including developing a Corporate Parenting Plan and appointing a dedicated Care Experience (CE) lead who provides advice and support at all stages of the learner journey.

40 Graduate Apprentice (GA) student numbers have increased steadily since the first intake in 2017, involving four academic schools and a portfolio of seven GA programmes.

175 fully-funded places have been awarded to RGU for session 2020-21. An institutional approach was taken to the development, design and delivery of GA programmes to ensure the student experience met academic, employer and student expectations, building on the experience of the University in work-based learning. Quality assurance and enhancement is managed through normal university quality processes. GA course leaders attend bimonthly cross-school meetings to enable planning and facilitate sharing good practice. At the time of the current ELIR, GA student satisfaction levels were high with a minimum of 87% satisfaction in the last two years of Student Evaluation Questionnaires (SEQ). In addition to SEQs, the student experience is evaluated through site visits and student-staff Liaison Group Meetings. GA students who met with the ELIR team reported strong staff partnership working and that they valued the workplace mentor and the good communication between the University and the work placement, facilitated by a dedicated VLE page. Students reported that academic staff were considered very approachable and any issues raised were addressed quickly. Based on the evidence, the ELIR team commends the University for an effective strategic approach to developing and working with partner organisations that spans business, industry, services and government bodies - nationally and internationally - which has a clear focus on economic, social and educational impact. This further informs and enhances the University's approach to work-based learning including its Graduate Apprenticeships.

41 A strategic focus on online programme development and delivery has seen the University recruit on average around 4,500 students per year since ELIR 2016. Particular emphasis has been on postgraduate taught students, enabling the University to become the third largest provider of online master's programmes in the UK. Although the decline in student numbers was reflected in this group of learners, data for 2020-21 shows early signs of a reversal of this trend. To support this growth of online students, guidance and minimum standards have been developed and are being monitored across the institution with the aim of achieving greater consistency and enhancing the student experience of online learners. It is evident from discussions with students and staff that the university-wide projects on online learning and assessment have had a positive impact on the student experience.

2.3 Supporting students in their learning at each stage of the learner journey

42 The University has an effective, student-centred approach to supporting students across their learner journey - regardless of stage, mode or location of study - with additional dedicated support for students who have particular characteristics and needs. Supporting employability was seen as a particular strength, by the institution and the ELIR team, where the work of the central Employability team is embedded in programmes. The establishment of the eHub (see paragraph 51) is valued by staff and students. The Access team, previously located in DELTA, was moved to become part of the Department of Student Recruitment and Admissions as the institution sought to capitalise on synergies between the two areas. The University has an inclusive approach to admissions and utilises contextual admissions to ensure a fair approach that recognises different learner journeys and backgrounds. The restructure and refocus of recruitment, marketing and admissions has impacted positively on student numbers and supports a more agile response to external markets.

43 The University operates a strong partnership approach between schools, support services and RGU:Union to deliver and develop student support services. Student feedback is actively sought and informs practice. At the time of the current ELIR, the support services data was not fully integrated within the RGU Insights database. While an amount of data is available to support services from the current RGU Insights databases, the University is exploring what other data could be drawn from support services to provide further understanding of the wider student experience. As with the student data in RGU Insights, data and student feedback on support services is actively sought, listened to and has

impact. With the rapid move to online delivery, the University responded quickly to make student services available to students in the online environment. The students who met with the ELIR team reported positively of their experience of support services and the availability of resources. It was acknowledged by students on practical/creative programmes of study that online was a little more challenging due to the need to create physically and to fully use more advanced software packages off-campus. Library resources were available to students in the online environment pre-pandemic; in addition, a click-and-collect service was introduced for stock not available online, and bookable study spaces were created on-campus. Bookable study spaces were particularly welcomed by students who recognised that the University was seeking to help students whose home environment was not fully conducive to study.

Student support services

44 Targeted transition support is provided to college articulating students, such as subject-specific DegreePrep programmes and the Associate Student Scheme. The University responded to the Student Transitions Enhancement theme, which ran from 2014 to 2017, by developing a range of work streams around three themes: cross university, discipline areas and students. This work has left a legacy in the institution that remains, keeping transition activity at the forefront of admissions and outreach work. This work includes developing study skills; supporting specific groups - for example, care experienced students; and offering Enrolment Support Packs that provide financial, technology and travel support, particularly for MD20 and care experienced students. The Associate Student Scheme is aimed at students who plan to progress to Robert Gordon University directly into year two or three of a linked degree course from a partner college. The scheme gives students access to academic resources and university facilities in advance of starting at the University to ensure a smooth transition.

45 Students who met with the ELIR team identified that a wide range of student support services were available including academic, pastoral, finance, health and wellbeing, and spoke positively about the services. Students and staff noted the University's focus on enhancing student services and the positive impact of the pandemic which has significantly advanced the accessibility of student services online, such as Ask RGU and online counselling. Aiming to ensure the quality of services, the University introduced an annual appraisal of student-facing support services. This process is informed by student feedback and other data and encourages service departments to reflect upon the delivery of services and their impact on the student experience. In addition to the Annual Appraisal Process, the University conducts an annual Student-Facing Support Services Review. Thematic review methodology is used to review a particular aspect of student services, the results of which inform enhancements to services. Data from a variety of sources inform the reviews including survey results, NSS and student feedback from the Student Voice Forum, the Student AGM, sabbatical officers and student representatives. The theme for academic year 2020-21 was 'Ask RGU: Effectively facilitating students raising questions, obtaining advice and help during their RGU journey'. This review will be the first review of the Ask RGU platform and the University will use the outcomes from the review to inform future enhancements in student communications.

Pastoral support

46 Students are able to access academic and pastoral support through the Personal Tutoring system within academic schools. Pastoral and wellbeing support is also accessible to students through both the Students' Union and central student services. Dedicated university services have been developed such as the network of trained First Responders for victims of gender-based violence and training of staff and students as mental health first aiders. RGU:Union also provides pastoral support of students, offering advice and support

on a range of practical matters including academic appeals and complaints. In addition, RGU:Union provides other student-led support including RGU Peer Support which is a student-led, peer-to-peer service which provides an opportunity for students to chat with a trained Peer Supporter.

47 The University launched training for Personal Tutors in 2018-19 and refreshed the Personal Tutoring system in 2019-20 in response to student feedback regarding variations in access and implementation across academic schools and departments. All academic schools have a Personal Tutoring scheme in place, in line with university policy on personal tutoring, which specifies the core aims of such systems and required characteristics. The Head of School is responsible for school implementation and monitoring of the Personal Tutoring scheme within the school. The Learning Infrastructure Committee reviewed operations of the Personal Tutoring scheme across schools and, from 2019-20, evaluation of the Personal Tutoring system has been included in annual appraisal processes. Students who met with the ELIR team reported significant progress in students' understanding of and access to Personal Tutors, although some were still unaware of who their Personal Tutor was, and they confirmed that variations in availability and level of support still existed across disciplines, schools and mode of study. Local implementation is part of the university policy and monitoring has been recently built into the annual appraisal processes (introduced 2019-20) but the University recognises through reviewing the annual appraisal information, feedback from students and feedback provided through the RGU:Union partnership meetings, that there are still areas where improvement is required. The ELIR team considered the Personal Tutoring scheme as one example of how the implementation of policy varied at school level (see paragraphs 49, 58, 74, 103, 108 and 127). The ELIR team recommend that the University reflects on the way in which the Personal Tutoring scheme is implemented at school level to ensure that taught students have access to and receive comparable student support.

Assessment and feedback

48 The University has a strategic approach to developments in learning, teaching and assessment which it drives forward through cross-university actions located within the Learning and Teaching Framework, which is overseen by the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee. In response to the 2016 ELIR, the University initiated a project to transform assessment and feedback with the recommendations being implemented from session 2017-18. The focus of the work was to reduce variability of feedback, implement good practice and to enhance clarity of feedback timescales. This resulted in a 5% increase in student overall satisfaction in the NSS and 7% increase in satisfaction regarding timeliness of feedback. A two-year project was also initiated that engaged with all academic schools in moving to online submission, marking and feedback. Recognising the different assessment practices deployed at discipline level, a hub-and-spoke model was adopted that ensured responsibility for local implementation sat with schools while cross-institutional coordination was led by the project team in DELTA providing centralised management. A project board consisting of senior management, academic staff and students provided institutional oversight and governance.

49 The University introduced a 20-working day turnaround period in 2016-17 as part of the assessment and feedback work following ELIR 2016. This included a requirement that student handbooks were to include a section on assessment dates with feedback return dates. An audit of student handbooks was carried out in 2019-20 to ensure compliance. The University has driven enhancement in assessment and feedback across the institution. During 2019-20, student feedback via RGU:Union highlighted that within some courses the required 20-working day feedback policy was not being fully implemented in a couple of schools. Discussions with the relevant Heads were held to explore and understand issues and the outcomes were communicated to the relevant student cohorts. The University

recognises the need to ensure that schools meet the 20-working day feedback deadline, and, where necessary, the time to return feedback forms part of the annual appraisal discussions. The ELIR team acknowledged the amount of work that the institution has conducted to enhance assessment and feedback, and the notable impact this has had on student satisfaction. The University is encouraged to continue this work.

50 At the time of the 2016 ELIR, the team observed some variable practice in the operation of the institution's criterion-referenced grading scheme. The current ELIR team noted that the issue remained current. The University has recognised this is an area of work that needs to be concluded and has convened a working party to make final recommendations during 2021-22. The ELIR team recommend that the University should consider and resolve the institutional approach to the grading system to ensure consistency and understanding for students by the start of the academic year 2022.

Employability

51 The University has a long-established, embedded approach to developing employability knowledge and skills in its graduates, the success of which is evident from the employability and graduate employability metrics with RGU second in UK and 46th in the world for graduate employment (QS Graduate Employability Rankings 2020). Since ELIR 2016, the University has brought together the Aberdeen Business School and the Design and Technology School placement offices with the study abroad and careers teams to create the Employability and Professional Enrichment Hub (Hub) which developed the eHub - the online employability platform. The Hub seeks to coordinate the delivery, development and deployment of employability support services including placements, study abroad and careers services. The eHub is available to all students, staff and alumni, and most academic schools are using the eHub, with current users exceeding 6,500 and over 220,000 activities since the 2018 launch. Staff and students who met with the ELIR team reported the University's clear strategic focus on employability was well understood, with the activities offered being valued by students across academic disciplines. Many of the resources available through the eHub have been embedded in programmes within academic schools to increase accessibility for students.

52 Academic programmes are designed to ensure a variety of learning and teaching activities. Employer engagement is a central feature and shapes the curriculum. The Centre for Collaborative and Interprofessional Practice enhances the employability of students through exposing them to other professions, collaborative working and interprofessional learning and practice. The University has sought to increase study abroad opportunities to further enhance employability skills in graduates, and support is provided by the Employability and Professional Enrichment Team supported by a link coordinator in each school. The ELIR team heard how international students or those seeking to work overseas after graduation are supported to gain placements and then industry contacts in their chosen country while still studying at RGU.

53 The RGU Employability Framework, an eight-module programme that can be undertaken in stages, supports students to reflect on, enhance and evidence their knowledge and skills prior to and throughout their programme of study. Partnership working with RGU:Union has enhanced planning and engagement with events, such as What's Next Conference, the implementation of the international student employment platform Student Circus, and the expansion of the Connect to Business programme. Further enhancement of the Employer Engagement Strategy was launched in 2019, providing a structured framework and partnership model that ensures employers are visible and engaged with students, and to help create talent pipelines.

54 The University invested resources in establishing an Entrepreneurship and Innovation Group (EIG) to provide support to students, staff and alumni - a key strategic objective of the University's Strategy which includes embedding entrepreneurship in all academic programmes and supporting the diversification of the local economy. Students are supported to develop enterprise skills through access to Innovation Master Classes, innovation skills events, workshops and entrepreneur training programmes. The University runs an accelerator programme to support students aiming to establish their own business. The accelerator programme is an annual competition offering five months of training, mentorship, co-working space resources and seed funding for each team.

55 The University has established a wide range of approaches and initiatives to help students succeed in their chosen career or business opportunity. Students and staff clearly understood and supported the University's focus on employability and talked positively about the opportunities available. The University collects its own employability data as well as benchmarking against sector data, which are used to inform decisions and drive enhancements. Based on the evidence, the ELIR team commends the University for the deliberate steps it continues to take to further enhance the development of employability and entrepreneurship across the student population through both curricular and extra-curricular activities which are integral to the RGU graduate attribute 'Whole Person' educational approach.

56 Separate to the very comprehensive and targeted work relating to student employability, the ELIR team commends the University for the strategic approach to developing and working with partner organisations that spans business, industry, services and government bodies - nationally and internationally - which has a clear focus on economic, social and educational impact. This further informs and enhances the University's approach to work-based learning including its Graduate Apprenticeships.

2.4 Postgraduate taught and research student experience

57 The University has effective quality assurance and enhancement processes in place to ensure the academic standards of its postgraduate provision. Student representation for postgraduate taught (PGT) students mirrors that in place for undergraduate programmes and PGT students can apply for school representative roles and University Governor positions. Professional services recognise the differing student support needs of PGT students both on and off campus. The expansion of online student support and guidance was welcomed by students who met with the ELIR team as this had made access to support much easier for various groups of students including Graduate Apprenticeships, international and online students, and those students who are also in work.

58 PGT student satisfaction and feedback are gathered through the same mechanisms in place for undergraduate students. All postgraduate taught students are allocated a Personal Tutor on commencement of their programme although the individual and process varies across schools (see paragraphs 46-47 and 74). Personal tutor interactions can be in person, online, via email or telephone. Students reported that there was some variability in access to Personal Tutors, assessment and feedback, and in the online experience in some programmes but, overall, the students spoke highly of their learning experience.

59 The University has taken deliberate and comprehensive steps to ensure those studying online and/or at a distance have a consistent, high-quality student experience, known as the RGU Baseline for Online Learning (see paragraph 82). Examples include: enhancements to the VLE; online programme hub and the website; support student access to information; and two-way communication. Lecture capture software has been integrated into the VLE to assist staff in creating online content and to meet accessibility requirements. Online collaborative platforms were deployed in tandem with additional staff development in

the use of technology and online learning. Postgraduate students studying creative programmes who met with the ELIR team acknowledged that some aspects of practical courses had been challenging but, overall, the experience was good. Students and class representatives reported that university staff were very approachable and any issues that may arise were resolved quickly.

Postgraduate research

60 The University introduced a single Graduate School in the 2016-17 academic session to enhance the postgraduate research (PGR) student experience and create a more consistent approach across the University. The Graduate School has primary responsibility for the enhancement and monitoring of the PGR student experience, promoting a vibrant research culture, growing institutional research outputs and improving the University's research performance. During 2019-20, the University has noted increased engagement by PGR students demonstrated by the increased number of student representatives, the appointment of PGR students to university committees and the presence of a PGR student as a governor of the University.

61 The University provides a range of opportunities for PGR students to feed back on their experience. The Research Degree Appraisal Overview is overseen by the Research Degrees Committee in addition to monitoring PGR student progression every six months. Transfer to doctoral study and examination timeframes are also monitored. The University provides a range of resources to support PGR students - from specialist journals and equipment, to bookable spaces in the Research Hub and technology. Students who met the ELIR team considered there to be a wide range of effective support structures in place. Access to funding for conference presentations was reported as good for UK events but more difficult for international conference, however, this varied across schools. The Graduate School encourages formal (study days) and informal (coffee and a blether) student engagement. The ELIR team noted that the Graduate School attempted to accommodate different time zones and those students in work.

62 Since the introduction of the 'new' Graduate School, PGR completion rates have increased from 30% of students in 2014-15 completing within four years to 73% in 2019-20. The PGR experience has been enhanced through linking to the nationally-recognised Vitae Researcher Development Framework and the inclusion of a refreshed and refocused Postgraduate Certificate in Researcher Professional Development, in the PGR programme of study. Supervisory arrangements were clearly understood and regular feedback on performance is provided to PGR students. Students reported that pastoral support was readily available from supervisors, student services or RGU:Union.

63 The University provides a range of opportunities for doctoral and master's research students to strengthen research culture; these include participating in the Three Minute Thesis, providing teaching opportunities and the launch of the professional development framework (RDF). Responding to student feedback, the Graduate School initiated a collaboration with the Brilliant Club in 2019 to secure paid teaching opportunities for students. Students who met the ELIR team indicated that further development of research culture would be welcome as they reported they tended to stay within their 'bubble'. Building a stronger research community institutionally and in schools has been acknowledged by the University as an area for further development.

64 The University has a policy to support PG students who teach whereby a mandatory one-day short course - 'Introduction to Teaching and Demonstrating' - must be completed prior to commencing teaching. Peer support from academic colleagues was provided and cross-marking undertaken to ensure academic standards are upheld. Students were encouraged to seek fellowship/associate fellowship of Advance HE which was

supported by the learning and teaching module available to all staff and students new to teaching. The ELIR team heard that the University previously monitored the training undertaken by PGR students who teach through HR where a contract could not be issued until the student had completed the mandatory training as a minimum. There were some variations in understanding and reported activity in relation to formal training for students who teach across the University. The ELIR team recommend that by the start of academic session 2021-22, the University should develop an effective oversight mechanism to ensure that all postgraduate students receive formal training before commencing teaching and assessment.

2.5 Learning environment, including the use of technology

65 The University has an effective, structured and strategic approach to developing its learning infrastructure which focuses on three key areas: the physical campus in Aberdeen, the digital/online environment and the provision of service both on and off campus. The University's 2016 ELIR identified support for online distance learners as an area for development. To address this, a major project was initiated in 2017 to develop and enhance the digital infrastructure to support online learning. This was followed by the Digital Estate Project in 2019 which aimed to upgrade the virtual learning environment. IT Services works closely with DELTA to ensure the University's IT infrastructure is maintained and aligns with learning and teaching developments. More recently, the University has invested significantly in the IT infrastructure to support learning, teaching and assessment beyond the VLE baseline implemented prior to the pandemic. The investment included student-facing services such as additional resources for the Employability Hub, online examinations and an online 24/7 support service for mental health and wellbeing.

66 Staff and students worked together to increase the consistency of the online student learner experience by the introduction of the RGU Baseline for Online Learning (see paragraph 82) which gives standardised guidance for all staff. An audit of online provision conducted in 2017 identified good practice and areas for development. The output from the audit shaped strategic objectives endorsed by University Executive to improve the quality and consistency of online experience and to enhance provision of student services for online learners. In addition, staff development was offered to support colleagues engaging with the baseline and sharing of good practice. This work, led by DELTA, was the feature of the University's annual teaching and learning conference. Further enhancements were initiated in 2019-20 including guidance on partnership working with students, standard welcome for students, easier access to support services and the upgrade of the VLE. Staff and students who met with the ELIR team endorsed the benefits of the baseline standards in helping staff and enhancing the student experience.

67 Specialist facilities are available aligned to programmes of study - for example, Clinical Skills Suite for Nursing and Health Sciences and Dart Simulator for Engineering. The University Estate Plan outlines the move of the Gray's School of Art Annex Building to a new purpose-built facility to be initiated in 2020-21. The University library offers study facilities on campus and access to a range of resources both on and off campus. Charging points have been introduced to support students bringing their own device to campus. The Library provides development for staff and students throughout the academic year and created safe bookable spaces on campus during the pandemic, to support student learning.

68 There was considerable evidence of partnership working between students, academic and professional services staff to enhance the student learning experience and environment. Examples include Student School Officers who not only have regular meetings with senior staff but are also charged with leading school enhancement projects; and part of the annual appraisal process includes student representatives meeting with Academic Quality Officers to consider quantitative and qualitative feedback where students report they

felt confident in questioning data and or challenging actions. Being listened to and ease of access to colleagues was reported by students and Student School Officers. The University and the students have developed a genuine culture of effective collaboration which is embedded through both formal and informal channels at all levels. The student voice is actively sought, valued and acted upon (see paragraphs 24-30 and 69).

2.6 Effectiveness of the approach to enhancing the student learning experience

69 The University has, throughout the period since the 2016 ELIR, aimed to enhance student engagement through continuing to develop formal and informal mechanisms. The University and the student body have developed a genuine culture of effective collaboration which is embedded through both formal and informal mechanisms at all levels of the institution. The student voice is actively sought, valued and acted upon across the University. Overall, the University is effective in its arrangements for enhancing the student experience. The open and active partnership working that exists at all levels between the University, students and RGU:Union is to be commended.

70 The University took a student and staff-centred approach in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, building on earlier developments in online and distance learning to successfully pivot to fully online during lockdown. Academic, pastoral and wellbeing support was made available online to ensure students could access support regardless of mode or location of study.

71 The University is to be commended for the deliberate steps to further enhance the development of employability and entrepreneurship skills across the student population through the use of curricular and extra-curricular activities which are integral to the RGU graduate attribute 'Whole Person' educational approach. Staff and students recognise and endorse the University's focus on employability. Support for students extends to all student groups including targeted support with partners or in-country for international students.

72 In addition to the clear strategic and embedded approach to student employability, the University has developed an effective strategic approach to developing and working with partner organisations that spans business, industry, services and government bodies - nationally and internationally - which has a clear focus on economic, social and educational impact. This further informs and enhances the University's approach to work-based learning including its Graduate Apprenticeships. The University's sustained, systematic and impactful strategic approach continues to have a positive impact on students' learning and life chances post-completion of their studies. Examples of effective partnerships with industry, external stakeholders and local communities are evident at institutional, school and programme levels. These collaborations impact locally, nationally and internationally and include long-standing partnership programmes with Lucerne, Human Development Scotland and Mexican Government Economic initiative.

73 There were some variations in understanding and reported activity in relation to postgraduate students who teach across the University. The University has in place appropriate mechanisms to support postgraduate students who teach, including mandatory training, optional courses and peer review of teaching. However, the University's formal system for ensuring students undergo mandatory training prior to teaching, previously monitored through Human Resources, is not currently in operation. The University should, by the start of academic session 2021-22, develop an effective oversight mechanism to ensure that all postgraduate students receive formal training before commencing teaching and assessment.

74 The University has a clear strategic approach whereby policies are deployed and monitored at school level with institutional oversight being managed through annual appraisal and the committee structure. The ELIR team noted some inconsistencies in staff and students' understanding of policies and their application at school level that may impact on the student experience. The ELIR team recommend that the University reflects on the way in which institutional policies and practice are implemented at school level to ensure parity of student experience across the institution. In particular, the University is asked to consider the Personal Tutor system to ensure all taught students have access to and receive comparable student support.

75 The University made a commitment in 2016 to minimise pockets of variability in assessment practices that had been identified regarding the deployment of the criterion-referenced grading scheme. As this work has not yet concluded, the ongoing variability in implementation provides ongoing opportunities for student confusion and inconsistencies where programmes are delivered by more than one school. The ELIR team recommend that the University considers and resolves the institutional approach to the grading system to ensure consistency and understanding for students by the start of the academic year 2022.

76 The ELIR team noted the recently refreshed strategic approach to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and recognised that this is still a developing area for the University. The new committee structure has been established and is already providing a forum for discussion. However, staff and students who met with the ELIR team did not demonstrate understanding of the University's focus, priority areas and actions. The ELIR team recommend that the University continues to develop and embed equality, diversity and inclusion strategy, actions and practices throughout all aspects of university activity and monitor the impact, ensuring that there is ownership and understanding among staff and students.

3 Strategy and practice for enhancing learning and teaching

3.1 Strategic approach to enhancement

77 The University has effective and established systems in place to promote the strategic enhancement of learning and teaching. The University's commitment to learning and teaching is evident in the University Strategy Map and associated yearly Business Plans and key performance indicators (KPIs) as well as School Academic Board Appraisal Reports. The RGU Insights dashboard data sources provide levels of analysis which ensures that KPIs are reflected at course level and inform the course Annual Appraisal Process and resulting Learning and Teaching Enhancement Plans. The University Strategy Map, Business Plans and KPIs align and play a key role in identifying and sharing good practice and enhancement activity at school and institutional level. The strategic enhancement of learning and teaching is guided by the Deputy Principal and Vice-Principal for Academic Development and Student Experience.

78 The enhancement of learning and teaching and the wider student experience is articulated through the University's Learning and Teaching Framework, launched in 2019-20. The framework comprises a set of principles aligned to the University's aim of providing 'Whole Person Education'. The key components of the framework are: The Future Professional; Collaborative Practice; Lifelong Learning; Authentic Learning; Technology Enabled Learning; Flexibility and Inclusion. Staff who met the ELIR team were familiar with both the framework and Whole Person Education concept and confirmed that it is central to their approach to learning and teaching. Learning and Teaching Enhancement Action Plans require course teams to map how this is embedded within courses as well as identify any gaps and how these will be addressed. For postgraduate research students, the concept of Whole Person Education is embedded in the Vitae Researcher Development Framework in

which students engage as part of their mandatory Postgraduate Certificate in Researcher Professional Development module.

79 The Learning and Teaching Framework is implemented at school level and aligns with the quality assurance and enhancement processes, specifically the Annual Appraisal Process, to drive enhancement from the ground up. A key output of the Annual Appraisal Process are the individual school-level Learning and Teaching Plans which form part of the School Action and Enhancement Plans and are linked to/align with the University's Learning and Teaching Framework. Fundamental to the conceptualisation of the framework is flexibility and latitude so that ownership is situated at school level, with enhancement at institutional level shared through the central committee structure and School Academic Boards. In discussions with the ELIR team, staff were familiar with and positive about the approach of implementing the framework at school level through annual appraisal and their school Teaching and Learning Committees.

80 The proactive and strategic development and enhancement of learning and teaching at the University is the responsibility of the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC) which reports directly to Academic Council. The Teaching, Learning and Assessment Sub-Committee is one of four sub-committees of QAEC. Together with Institution-Led Subject Review and the Annual Appraisal Process, the sub-committee is a key mechanism in operationalising the strategy for learning and teaching enhancement. Teaching Excellence Fellows are core members of the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Sub-Committee where good practice is collated and shared as a standing item on the agenda. QAEC also considers outcomes from Institution-Led Subject Reviews and validations. Good practice emerging from this process as well as that identified through annual appraisal across all schools is shared through School Academic Boards and the committee structure by QAEC members. Academic Strategic Leads (one for each school) (see paragraph 103) are members of QAEC and key conduit for sharing good practice.

81 School Appraisal Reports require schools to specifically document EDI data and actions and these are discussed in annual appraisal meetings. The minutes of the Equality and Diversity Sub-Committee (EDSC) also highlight other areas where EDI-focused activity and actions could be improved, including an identified need to improve the data sets available for the appraisal process, particularly in respect of student services, to enable future monitoring. In the review visit meetings, the ELIR team was encouraged to learn that the University was now taking additional steps to develop the focus on EDI to ensure success for all students including for some specific groups where outcomes had been recognised as areas of concern (see paragraph 35). Since the EDSC had only been in existence for a few months at the time of the current ELIR, the full impact of this new approach was yet to be realised and the ELIR team encourages the University to continue to develop and embed its EDI strategy, actions and practices and evaluate the impact and effectiveness going forward.

82 The Department of Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA) has a central role in coordinating and operationalising the enhancement of learning and teaching and is responsible directly to the Deputy Principal and Vice-Principal for Academic Development and Student Experience. The Step Change team within DELTA, working in partnership with colleagues and students from across the wider university, and particularly school-facing Teaching Excellence Fellows, are responsible for the management and coordination of institutional enhancement-focused learning and teaching projects. Yearly enhancement projects are identified through student feedback and prioritised through the university committee structure. An example is the 'Distance Learning Enhancement Project', focused on understanding and further enhancing the support for online distance learners. The project led to the development and publication of the RGU 'Baseline for Online Learning' and enabled DELTA to realign and update its staff development provision in online and

distance learning. This resulted in an enhanced support package offered to 13 course teams to help them meet the expectations set out in the Baseline.

Use of data

83 The annual appraisal process in schools ensures an active link between the planning process and enhancement of the student experience more broadly. Individual course management teams incorporate relevant actions into their course-level Learning and Teaching Plans which, in turn, feed into the School Learning and Teaching Action and Enhancement Plans which are overseen by the School Academic Boards. The plans are increasingly informed by rich data and evidence supplied via the RGU Insights dashboard. Staff are supported in using the dashboard effectively through briefings which take place between June and September, to coincide with the release of new yearly data. The ELIR team learned that enhancements to the dashboard are routinely made each year, based on feedback from users. It is evident that data is driving decision-making at all levels and the use of data is playing an increasingly critical role in translating the high-level strategy for enhancing the learning and teaching experience into targeted requirements at course and school level (see paragraphs 129-132 and 134). An example provided to the ELIR team was the changes made to some modules to improve the attainment and enhance the student experience for articulating students. All staff that the ELIR team spoke to were enthusiastic about the use of RGU Insights in profiling course performance and driving enhancement through the annual appraisal process, with one staff member describing it as 'transformational' to their practice.

84 A second QAEC sub-committee, the Learning Infrastructure Sub-Committee (LISC), is responsible for setting policy and overseeing enhancement activity in relation to student facing support services. As with academic schools, the annual appraisal process for student-facing support services encourages departments to reflect upon delivery of services and the impact on the student experience. Action and Enhancement Plans are produced which are shared and monitored through the academic cycle by LISC, reporting to QAEC. The ELIR team were informed of plans to develop the RGU Insights dashboard to include additional data sets that would more directly support the student support services appraisal process.

3.2 Impact of the national Enhancement Themes and related activity on policy and practice

85 The national Enhancement Themes are a key external reference point for the University and staff engage with the work of the Enhancement Themes to manage enhancement initiatives across the institution.

86 The University makes strategic use of the outcomes of Enhancement Themes to modify their practice and policies. A clear example of this is the previous theme – 'Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience' - which facilitated strategic opportunities to build on the institutional use of data, commended in the 2016 ELIR, to evolve a culture of evidence-based enhancement within the institution. This resulted in further strategic investment in RGU Insights and its integration with the annual appraisal process and development of Action and Enhancement Plans.

87 The University aims to maintain a balance of new activity aligned to the national Enhancement Themes and Focus On projects with institutional priorities using an evidence-based approach. This has enabled the University to progress a range of annual institutional-level projects providing opportunity for engagement and interpretation at practitioner level as well as student engagement in the theme. Student Presidents (Education and Welfare) have been key enablers, augmented by contributions from Student

School Officers, as well as students directly involved in projects. An institutional Steering Group for Enhancement Themes, reporting to the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Sub-Committee of QAEC, oversees projects linked to the Enhancement Themes, including: Supporting our Course Leaders; Development of 'Borderless Learning'; and Understanding the Graduate Apprenticeship Experience. Outcomes of the projects are disseminated through a variety of mechanisms including updates to committees, facilitated conversations and bespoke workshops. A 'Showcase Event' held in 2019 where project leads shared findings with heads of academic areas, professional services and students was viewed positively by the ELIR team.

88 The University's early plans for engagement with the current Enhancement Theme - 'Resilient Learning Communities' - outlines how the Theme aligns well with the strategic objectives and the ambitions outlined in the University's Learning and Teaching Framework. The University acknowledges that in order to fully capitalise on positive enhancements introduced as a result of their response to COVID-19, it will be essential to take stock of these developments in considering the future direction for online learning. It was clear to the ELIR team that the University had adopted a student-centred approach in response to COVID-19 which was viewed positively by the team. The University is encouraged to continue to drive enhancement through lessons learned and the positive practices which were developed and have been identified by staff and students.

89 The University also engages with other sector activities such as Focus On projects. The University Principal chaired the 2019 QAA 'Focus On: Graduate Skills - Shaping Strategy' event investigating graduate and employer perspectives on skills. In 2020, RGU became the first university in Scotland to be awarded Scottish Innovative Student Award (SISA) self-accreditation status from the Scottish Institute for Enterprise (SIE). Overall, it was evident to the ELIR team that the University has an effective approach to engaging staff with the national Enhancement Themes and other sector work.

3.3 Approaches to identifying and sharing good practice

90 The University has an effective and systematic approach to identifying and sharing good practice. There is a multi-layered approach to identify and disseminate good practice across the institution including: the annual appraisal process; Institution-Led Subject Review of taught provision; the annual Teaching and Learning Conference; and a range of formal and more informal practice sharing mechanisms.

91 During the review visits, the ELIR team met staff who identified the annual school appraisal process as an important mechanism for sharing good practice. The active participation of students at all stages throughout the annual appraisal process was also considered important, and illustrative of the embedded partnership approach in action and a driver of enhancement and continuous improvement. Student representatives are supported in their role through training and development offered by DELTA, Academic Quality Officers and RGU:Union. Students who met the ELIR team particularly welcomed the open and transparent ways in which they are supported in understanding data around appraisal, and how their contribution to the process ensured the student voice was actively represented. The ELIR team noted that the students felt particularly empowered to challenge and make suggestions which were acted upon.

92 The University's annual Learning and Teaching Conference attracts over 200 attendees each year and is organised jointly by DELTA and the Teaching Excellence Fellows. The conference themes link to strategic priorities and include external speakers and contributions from staff from academic schools, professional and support departments as well as students.

93 Academic courses are the significant unit of responsibility for teaching delivery and therefore the annual appraisal process is an important means of identifying and sharing elements of practice that are effective at subject and school level. QAEC and its sub-committees provide the formal mechanisms to share good practice at institutional level. Areas of good or innovative practice identified in School Academic Board Annual Appraisal Reports are considered by QAEC and those considered worthy of wider dissemination are shared at School Academic Boards. Themes arising from the annual appraisal process, as well as RGU Insights data, help inform the focus of staff development priorities and activities for DELTA. The Academic Regulations Sub-Committee of QAEC also holds two staff development seminars each year to support the smooth running of Assessment Boards.

94 DELTA is responsible for identifying, developing and disseminating good practice across the institution through regular activities such as the Focus On series and RGU:TeachMeets. The Network for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning is a practitioner-led network to enable dialogue and sharing of practice across disciplines and was established following the dissolution of the Faculty Quality Enhancement Sub-Committees in 2017.

95 During the COVID-19 pandemic, additional means of sharing good practice were introduced including a new online forum for staff; dedicated meeting of the Teaching Learning and Assessment Sub-Committee; provision of enhanced resources to support all staff in the shift to online learning and assessment; specific online seminars and 'In Conversation With...' sessions; and the replacement of the planned Learning and Teaching Conference with a series of virtual events and presentations. Staff who met with the ELIR team welcomed these opportunities to share good practice and learn from each other. These activities were viewed positively by the ELIR team.

3.4 Engaging, developing and supporting staff

96 The University has effective approaches for engaging and supporting staff in their continued development and for the ongoing enhancement of learning and teaching through its Employee Performance Review process, associated staff development and CPD offerings, and new career progression pathways aligned to recognition of excellence in learning and teaching. A range of staff development opportunities and CPD are provided through the Organisational Development team within the Department of Human Resources and the Academic Development team within DELTA. Organisational Development coordinate induction for new staff, the Employee Performance and Review process (EPR), and aspects of staff development in leadership and management ranging from one-day 'essentials' courses to broader leadership programmes including national programmes such as AURORA. The team also coordinate a mentoring programme. Individual staff development priorities are identified through the EPR process and resulting personal development plan. Staff informed the ELIR team that they were supported in accessing staff development opportunities - both those provided internally by the University and externally where appropriate, for example, in subject area specialisms such as Green Energy.

97 The University's Advance HE-accredited Professional Teaching Framework comprises a taught programme (PgCert) for less experienced staff and an Experiential Programme for those with more substantial experience. The framework was redeveloped and enhanced in 2017 and has resulted in a 46% increase in the number of staff achieving HEA Fellowship (from 328 in 2016-17 to 479 in 2018-19) and growth in Senior Fellowships from 19 in 2015-16 to 59 in 2018-19. It is a requirement for all new staff to gain Fellowship Status as part of their probation. While, deliberately, no institutional targets have been set, the percentage of staff at RGU with HEA Fellowship status is 20% above the UK sector

average. Staff, including non-academic staff, are encouraged to seek Senior Fellowship status and are supported to do this through the Experiential Programme route.

98 Peer review of teaching is recognised as an important element of personal development and quality enhancement, and is used across the University in a number of different ways: as a mandatory element of the DELTA short course 'Introduction to Teaching and Demonstrating' for staff new to teaching; as an element of assessment within the Professional Teaching Framework Taught Programme (PgCert); and within school-based schemes, some of which are mandatory for all staff, and some voluntary. In the latter two cases, staff may choose to have any aspect of their practice observed that is relevant to the UK Professional Standards Framework Areas of Activity - for example, online learning design or the provision of feedback.

99 DELTA plays a strategic role in coordinating and delivering staff development to enhance learning and teaching and offers a comprehensive range of development opportunities. In addition to coordinating the Professional Teaching Framework, DELTA supports workshops, the Focus On series, RGU:TeachMeets, the annual Teaching and Learning Conference, and less formal events such as 'Enhancing Practice Days'. In addition, it produces a comprehensive range of guides and resources in learning and teaching. The ELIR team viewed the work of DELTA positively.

100 During the COVID-19 pandemic, additional means of supporting staff through the move to fully online learning and assessment were provided by both DELTA and IT Services. In discussions with the ELIR team, staff confirmed they were very satisfied with the additional support provided and reported on the positive impact that this has had on developing their practice, some of which they intended to continue after returning to in-person teaching.

101 The University conducted a major review of academic roles in 2016 which resulted in significant changes to recognition, reward and career progression for academic staff. The underlying objectives of this review included the expansion of career progression opportunities through revision of grade structures mapped against the UK Professional Standards Framework; introduction of a more transparent progression application process; introduction of incentivisation through performance-related pay; and clearer alignment between roles and university KPIs. The RGU Insights dashboard provides the evidence against which course leader performance is reviewed. Senior staff cited greater consistency and improvement in the clarity of the new grades and roles that the review had brought about and were positive about the impact the introduction of additional payments for sustained performance for course leaders made to the enhancement of the student experience. Academic staff were also generally enthusiastic about the changes and welcomed the revision of academic roles to reflect contemporary practice and the clear merit-based promotions structure. While the ultimate aim is to enable conferment of full professorship through the new Learning and Teaching route, currently there are none in place and so the full impact of the new promotion pathway has yet to be fully realised.

Teaching Excellence Fellows

102 As part of the academic role review project, the previous titular roles of Learning Enhancement Co-ordinator and Teaching Fellows were replaced by 'Teaching Excellence Fellow' (TEF) roles which are open to application annually by all academic staff. TEFs work on institutional-level strategic priorities alongside DELTA as well as supporting enhancement at school level. At institutional level, the TEFs play an important role in the Teaching and Learning Sub-Committee where they lead on sharing of good practice across schools and they support the Institution-Led Subject Review (ILSR) process as well as the annual Teaching and Learning Conference. In addition, TEFs played a major role in the

development and implementation of the Learning and Teaching Framework. In schools where there currently is no TEF appointment, a TEF from another school can be allocated to provide support.

Academic Strategic Leads

103 Academic Strategic Lead (ASL) roles were also introduced to support Heads of School in implementing university policy and strategy, and the management of academic staff. ASLs are involved in quality and enhancement processes, such as validation panels, and committees, such as QAEC. The number of ASL roles and their specific responsibilities within each school varies depending on the focus required by the Head of School. Sample job descriptions of ASL roles from across three schools show that there is variation in the duties, and essential and desirable requirements for the role, and it was confirmed in discussions with staff that workload allocation varies across schools too. There is leadership training provided for ASLs and the University is working to ensure that ASLs have adequate time allocated to fulfil these roles. Opportunities for ASLs to engage further in university committees and projects is being explored. The ELIR team learned that there is ongoing work to develop the ASL role and improve consistency, including review of the workload allocation for the role and plans to expand leadership training to embrace aspects of academic leadership including annual appraisal work. This was described as a 'work in progress'. The ELIR team encourages the University to continue with its work to develop an acceptable balance of consistency with local variation to ensure equity in roles across all schools.

3.5 Effectiveness of the approach to implementing institutional strategies and enhancing learning and teaching

104 It is evident that the University has a clear strategic framework (the Learning and Teaching Framework) and effective arrangements for enhancing learning and teaching and for promoting good practice across the University. Strategies are embedded within School Academic Board Annual Appraisal Reports and are monitored effectively by University and School Academic Boards. Student partnership in the process is strategic and evident. The increased focus on useful data for management and staff, feeding into the annual appraisal process, is providing both with greater insights into the operation and effectiveness of all facets of the university. The ELIR team noted the creation of the new Equality and Diversity Sub-Committee and encourages RGU to continue to develop its plans for a more focused and strategic use of EDI data to drive action and enhancement activities to support positive outcomes for all students.

105 The revision of staff roles, reward systems and career progression structures are aligned to the purpose of driving enhancement of the student experience. Although it is early days for some of these changes to play out fully, there is still some evidence of variability across schools and the University is encouraged to continue to monitor the impact and effectiveness of these changes going forward to ensure the new structures and roles produce the required effect.

106 Taking forward the benefits learned through the University's response to COVID-19, aligned to the 'Resilient Learning Communities' Enhancement Theme, will provide a valuable opportunity to drive progress against the University's strategic objectives and ambitions.

4 Academic standards and quality processes

4.1 Key features of the institution's approach to managing quality and setting, maintaining, reviewing and assessing academic standards

107 The University has effective and systematic arrangements for managing the quality and securing academic standards of its provision. Procedures and regulations are clear, comprehensive, and are standard across the institution and its schools. They meet the Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) and align with the guidance issued by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). The institution has mapped its approach to the Quality Code and is aware of areas where enhancements may be made.

Governance

108 The University's governance framework has an inclusive structure to engage all academic schools. Academic Council (AC), which is chaired by the Principal, has overall responsibility for the planning, supervision and development of the institution's academic work and for maintaining academic standards. Four standing committees report into Academic Council, including the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC) and the Research Degrees Committee. The key role of the QAEC is informed by the work of a further four sub-committees: Academic Regulations, Learning Infrastructure, Teaching, Learning and Assessment and, with effect from the start of the 2020-2021 academic year, Equality and Diversity. At the school level, School Academic Boards (SABs) are responsible for a range of quality and enhancement practices affecting their taught provision and report into the QAEC. Each school is represented on QAEC by one of the school's ASLs which ensures a two-way flow of information on key policies and initiatives. The ELIR team noted some variability in the roles, duties and requirements for the ASL role and understood that there was ongoing work to further develop the role and ensure adequate time is allocated to fulfil these roles (see paragraphs 74 and 103). The University's organisational regulations set out clear and appropriate terms of reference and membership of the committees with responsibility for academic standards and quality processes. The ELIR team noted that the terms of reference of QAEC had been amended recently to strengthen its approach to the consideration of quality assurance process outputs, following the mappings to the Quality Code.

109 Executive responsibility for the University's taught and postgraduate research provision lies with the Deputy Principal and Vice-Principal for Academic Development and Student Experience and the Vice-Principal Research respectively. The role of the Assistant Chief Academic Officer (CAAO) complements the established committee structure, having a key function in the management of quality and standards, particularly relating to the periodic reviews process - Institution-Led Subject Review - in ensuring a consistency of approach. The Graduate School is responsible for research degree provision and DELTA and the Department for Governance and Academic Quality (DGAQ) provide operational support for enhancement and quality assurance respectively. The University's regulatory framework is appropriate and assessment boards operate to university-wide regulations. The Academic Regulations Sub-Committee has oversight of the institution's regulations and the ELIR team noted that its work promotes consistency and good practice in their application.

Course approval

110 Institutional policies relating to course and module development and approval are aligned to sector expectations expressed in the Quality Code, take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and relevant qualification frameworks. Institutional guidance is clear, comprehensive and promotes a consistent approach. Staff who met the ELIR team observed that, over the last

five years, the Academic Quality Handbook had been regularly updated, guidance had become more explicit and that regular training was provided.

111 New course approvals commence at school level and require the approval of the Academic Development Committee (ADC) before the completion of the relevant proposal documentation. Course approval follows a validation procedure with a specially convened panel, the composition of which is approved by the ACAO, and which includes an ASL, an external academic expert and a student member, and, where appropriate, effective employer and professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) involvement. In discussions with the ELIR team students confirmed involvement in approval processes and that training was provided. Validated courses are subject to reapproval during ILSRs. Procedures for amendments to existing provision and for module and short course approval are clearly set out with some appropriate devolved authority within schools. Academic Quality Officers maintain oversight of the cumulative impact of changes and a revalidation is triggered if the accumulated volume exceeds a prescribed proportion. The University has a large number of courses recognised or accredited by PSRBs and, where possible, approval, accreditation and validation events are scheduled to coincide. QAEC maintains oversight to ensure that this happens where possible. Due to the pandemic the University implemented processes to enable any necessary temporary changes to be dealt with in an agile manner, be shared with external examiners and documented at assessment boards; the ELIR team considered such an approach to be appropriate. The documentation seen by the ELIR team enabled it to confirm that the process was robust, structured and systematic and that institutional and sector expectations were adhered to. Staff the ELIR team met demonstrated a sound understanding of the institutional requirements for new course approval.

112 The University was one of the first providers of graduate apprenticeship degrees in 2017 (see paragraph 40). Working strategically with industry and employers it has expanded its graduate apprenticeship portfolio and the number of students studying through those routes. To facilitate this expansion, the University has adapted its standard approval practices and utilised a blended learning approach. These have enabled the development of an institution-level graduate apprenticeship model, the approval and enhancement of which, while using the flexibility of normal approval processes, are responsive to employer and student needs and build on the institution's work-based learning experience. Validation events included staff from Skills Development Scotland. The University's approach to the development of graduate apprenticeships illustrates its strategic approach to working with industry and key stakeholders (see paragraphs 51-56).

Monitoring and review

113 The University has two main quality assurance processes to enable it to have effective oversight of and opportunities to enhance the academic standards of its taught provision: Annual Appraisal and Institution-Led Subject Review (ILSR) - its periodic review process. Since ELIR 2016, the former has been significantly enhanced through the use of data dashboards (RGU Insights) which inform the process (see paragraphs 83-84). In discussions with the ELIR team, staff spoke positively about the way in which the use of data enables monitoring and enhancements in courses. In addition, the annual appraisal process for student-facing support services was developed during 2017-18 to enable the Learning Infrastructure Sub-Committee (LISC) to have confidence in the quality of services for students. The processes are robust and enable identification of any problem areas with plans for effective enhancement.

114 The cycle for annual appraisal starts with an institutional-level review of relevant data to identify themes to be followed up. Data drawn on includes analyses of student feedback, equality and diversity, evaluations of external examiners' comments and findings from internal audit reports. Course Leaders complete appraisals for their courses together

with action plans which are approved and monitored by Schools Academic Boards (SABs) with oversight by the QAEC. Consideration of these by SABs leads to a SAB Appraisal Report, with Student School Officer input facilitated by Academic Quality Officers. SAB Appraisal Reports are informed by additional data sets and include Action and Enhancement Plans which in turn are integrated into School Learning and Teaching plans. Relevant senior staff meet with the Head of School and a summary report is submitted to QAEC for consideration (see paragraphs 77-80). The consideration of Course Annual Appraisals and action and enhancement plans, along with the SAB Insights Data dashboard, leads to the preparation of a SAB Annual Appraisal Report including SAB actions and an Enhancement Plan in which enhancement element maps to the Teaching and Learning Plan. Thereafter, the Head of School meets with the Assistant Chief Academic Officer, Deputy Principal and Vice-Principal for Academic Development and Student Experience and the Academic Quality Officer to consider the SAB report. The Academic Quality Officer's summary of this meeting is provided to QAEC together with the course and SAB appraisal reports.

115 A similar process applies to postgraduate taught courses, although the sample report provided to the ELIR team was not informed by the same quality of data. However, the data which would normally be used, together with Enhancement and Action Plans enabled the ELIR team to have confidence that there was a clear commitment to ensuring academic standards and enhancing the student experience in response to their feedback.

116 The monitoring of taught courses is complemented by the preparation of annual appraisal reports for student-facing support services (see paragraph 84). These enable service departments to reflect on service delivery, their utility to students and to produce action plans. Consideration and monitoring of these is undertaken by LISC to inform QAEC.

117 ILSRs follow a clear and structured process on a six-year cycle to review subject provision, plan course enhancements and result in the formal reapproval of the subject course and module portfolios. The process is implemented at the school level and a review event covers all courses at undergraduate and postgraduate-taught levels within the relevant school. ILSRs are designed to comment on both standards and the quality of provision and focus on both assurance and enhancement. Composition of panels includes a student and external subject experts. Students are provided with training for the role by an Academic Quality Officer. Documentation provided enables the ILSR panels to engage in robust and constructive dialogue with the school. Formal reports on the outcomes of the process are prepared by the Department for Governance and Academic Quality (DGAQ) and a confirmed version is published. Outcomes are reported to QAEC, Academic Council and the Board of Governors, and are included in annual statements to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). A follow-up interim review report is required from the relevant school three years after the review and is subject to approval by QAEC. Scrutiny of the reports provided to the ELIR team and discussions with staff enables the team to confirm that the process is robust, thorough and that outcomes meet the requirements of the University and SFC.

118 The ELIR team noted that ILSR had also been applied to the International College at the University (ICRGU) to ensure confidence in academic standards, a commitment to enhancement of the student experience and to identify a forward development plan. The outcomes demonstrated strong relationships between the University and the ICRGU and effective quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms. In addition, as part of the implementation of outcomes arising from the review, the university committee structure now shows clear links between ICRGU committees and those of the University (see paragraphs 138-139).

119 In addition to its ILSR, the University has a Student-Facing Support Services Review process. This is designed to ensure that the support services offered by the institution are consistently enhanced and meet the needs of students. The process is robust

and structured and the ELIR team was able to confirm that the implementation of the process meets its requirements.

120 At the time of the 2016 ELIR no periodic review of the institution's research degree provision had taken place since 2012-13. The University had decided to create a single Graduate School. The Outcome report of the 2016 ELIR indicated that the University should '... make progress with the implementation of revised arrangements for periodic review of research degree provision'. Following the establishment of the Graduate School in 2016-17, the University developed policies and procedures for the annual and periodic monitoring of its research degree provision. Although there is some outdated information in its guidance, the University has a revised procedure for Research Degree Internal Review (RDIR), closely aligned to the ILSR process. The institution conducted its RDIR under the revised arrangements in 2018. In the view of the ELIR team, the guidance provided for the RDIR is clear and appropriate, and aligns with the requirements of the Quality Code and sector expectations. The RDIR was carried out in accordance with institutional guidance.

121 The University has clear policies covering PGR supervision, monitoring, progress, assessment and examination. During the review visits the ELIR team met students who demonstrated an understanding about what was expected of them and what they could expect from the University. Although students are supported within their academic schools, it is the responsibility of the Graduate School to ensure the quality and enhancement of the postgraduate research student experience, with strategic oversight lying with the Research Degrees Committee and the Vice-Principal Research. The ELIR team saw examples of the Postgraduate Certificate Researcher Development Annual Appraisal, analysis of an internal Postgraduate Research Experience Survey and research student data. It was clear to the ELIR team that oversight by the University was generally thorough and robust.

Assessment

122 The University expects students to be assessed in a manner which provides an objective and comprehensive measure of individual student achievement and relates it to the national standard of awards. It follows that assessments are designed to enable students to demonstrate achievements of course learning outcomes as well as those at the level of the module. The overall approach to the management of assessment requirements and associated policies is overseen by the Academic Regulations Sub-Committee of the QAEC. It was evident to the ELIR team from consideration of documentation, that QAEC performed its functions diligently and in accordance with its terms of reference. Its work on, for example, fitness to practice, academic misconduct, assessment board decisions, appeals, self-certification and mitigating circumstances, seeks to ensure consistency across the institution and maintain and enhance standards. Students the ELIR team met were clear about where to find information about appeals. There are effective arrangements to accommodate the individual needs of students. The University's approach to changes required to recognise the impact of the pandemic was appropriate, recognising the need to enable students to succeed without endangering academic standards and quality. University Academic Regulations are clear and comprehensive and the ELIR team noted Academic Regulations Seminars to involve and update colleagues around the institution. Assessment Boards ensure the correct application of policies and regulations covering assessment progression and awards.

4.2 Use of external reference points in quality processes

123 The University has an effective approach to using external reference points in setting, maintaining and enhancing academic standards and quality. The University's academic quality framework, as expressed in its Academic Quality Handbook, is aligned to the UK Quality Code. The University has mapped its approach to the new Quality Code to

ensure that it complies with the Expectations for quality and standards and their respective Core practices. As a result, it is aware of areas for further enhancement; these include the review of the Assessment Policy and revisions to student handbooks. Courses and their constituent modules are designed using the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is also referenced in its academic regulations. QAA Subject Benchmark Statements and the requirements of PSRBs are taken into account in course validation and revalidation procedures and the outcomes of ILSRs reflect the use of external reference points. Graduate Apprenticeships are designed to map to the appropriate Skills Development Scotland framework. The University uses external expertise from academia, business and industry throughout its approval and review processes.

External examining

124 The University regards external examining as an important feature of its quality assurance system. It is crucial to its assessment process in ensuring objectivity, comparability of standards and ensuring the fair and equitable treatment of students. The institution's Academic Quality Handbook sets out clear policies and procedures. The role is essentially one of moderation, but they are also consulted on summative assessments and analyse grade profiles. Arrangements for appointment are robust and all external examiners receive an induction. The External Examiner Report Form Template is effective in covering the required topics and enables the external examiners to highlight good practice. Annual reports prepared by external examiners form part of the Annual Appraisal process and are read by the ACAO and the Deputy Principal and Vice-Principal for Academic Development and Student Experience. Institutional analysis of external examiner reports is clear and is considered by the QAEC to ensure that processes are completed in accordance with institutional policy. Arrangements for the appointment and involvement of external examiners in research degrees are overseen by the Research Degrees Committee and conform to sector norms and expectations.

125 The ELIR team noted that students had limited knowledge of the work of external examiners, their reports and how they were actioned. Staff also described some variability in the approach to sharing information and actions arising from the work of external examiners. Many reports comment favourably on the quality and standards of the University and the work students produce. Accordingly, the University may wish to reflect upon the ways in which such positive comments could be shared with students.

4.3 Commentary on action taken since ELIR 3

126 In the 2016 ELIR, the University was asked to consider five areas where further development was required. The current ELIR team considered that the University had made satisfactory progress in addressing them but noted that there was some ongoing work as the institution's approaches evolved.

127 The work to enhance consistency of practice in assessment and feedback was a major project to move to online submission, to reduce variability of experience, and enhance clarity of feedback timescales. The ELIR team noted the improvements in student satisfaction scores resulting from this. However, it also noted that students, depending on their academic school, continued to experience variability in the quality and timeliness of feedback and that the institution acknowledged the need for ongoing monitoring of its expectations. The creation and implementation of a single Graduate School was regarded as a positive development and, as noted above (see paragraph 120), revised arrangements for the periodic review of research degree provision had taken place. The University acknowledged that work to strengthen the research culture was still in progress. Specific mention of developments relating to support for online distance learners, the role of Learning

Enhancement Co-ordinators and Teaching Fellows, and collaborative provision are found in sections 3 and 5 of this report.

128 The ELIR team noted evidence of the ways in which the University had built on, developed and embedded the eight areas of positive practice identified in the 2016 ELIR report, of which four linked directly to themes identified by the University for the current ELIR. In addition, it was clear to the ELIR team that the institution continues to identify areas where further enhancements can take place.

4.4 Approach to using data to inform decision-making and evaluation

129 The University has an effective approach to the use of data to inform its decision-making, evaluation and enhancement processes. Its approach continues to develop to enable identification and progression of strategic priorities. The University has also used its engagement with the previous QAA Enhancement Theme - 'Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience' - to inform its approach.

130 The 2016 ELIR identified the effective and strategic use of data as an area of positive practice. The University's strategic approach has evolved further, designed to ensure that data is available to support key processes such as the annual and periodic monitoring reviews. The University invested in business intelligence software to develop its RGU Insights dashboards (see paragraphs 83-84). The Department for Governance and Academic Quality led the redesign of annual monitoring and, with key inputs from other institutional stakeholders, the development of annual appraisal dashboards. These visualise data required at subject, school and institutional levels to ensure that review and action are data informed. For example, it allows analysis of student performance by demographic characteristics, and enables better assessment of progression and successful transition to employment. In turn, this has led to a better understanding of the student body and there are extensive capabilities to underpin enhancement activity. This is particularly evident in the way the data feeds into annual appraisal processes and course-level teaching plans. Support for staff in using the dashboards is coordinated through DGAQ and is effective. The AQOs provide bespoke support, while DELTA provides more general training on data in the university sector for students who sit on school and university committees to enable good understanding of the data. Staff the ELIR team met demonstrated a commitment to improve the overall student experience and use the data supplied to do this. The University is considering the development of the dashboards to provide richer data to support reviews of student-facing support services, complaints and benchmarking of courses.

131 The University also makes use of other data including the National Student Survey; its internal Student Experience Questionnaire which provides quantitative and qualitative feedback on module and course provision; Pulse Surveys; its own RGU Leavers Survey to fill a gap caused by the demise of the DLHE survey; and Graduate Outcomes data. These inform the annual appraisal process. In the view of the University, its approach to the use of data has resulted in an enhanced ability to self-evaluate and stronger metrics in key areas such a student satisfaction and employability.

132 The University recognises the benefits which accrue from its approach to data-informed review and decision-making. The ELIR team commends the institutional approach to gathering and using data which is easily accessible to academic and professional services staff and which informs evaluation, action planning and decision-making. The approach continues to evolve to ensure that all aspects of the University's student experience are captured and drives enhancement (see paragraphs 25-26, 83-84 and 104).

4.5 Effectiveness of the arrangements for securing academic standards

133 The University has effective arrangements for securing academic standards. Its policies are comprehensive; its regulations are appropriate and clear; its processes are structured and administered soundly. All of them are reviewed regularly, publicly-available and disseminated. The institution's quality framework is aligned to the Quality Code and other reference points and it is aware of areas in need of enhancement, including those around its grading scheme (see paragraphs 50 and 75). Students are engaged in quality processes and the University makes systematic use of its external examiners. Externality is used appropriately in course approval, and periodic review processes. Oversight of standards and quality through the governance system is robust and is allied to a determination to continually improve.

4.6 Effectiveness of the institution's approach to self-evaluation, including the effective use of data to inform decision-making

134 The University has effective arrangements for self-evaluation including effective use of data to inform decision-making. Extensive data suites are widely available within schools and the broader University and play a key role in annual and periodic review mechanisms and in decision-making. Evaluative processes apply not just to academic courses but also to student-facing services, research provision and collaborative activity. The institution's processes are systematic and this enables it to identify good practice for dissemination. The University has developed the areas of positive practice since the 2016 ELIR in its determination to enhance quality.

5 Collaborative provision

5.1 Key features of the institution's strategic approach

135 The University's strategy map indicates an intention to 'expand the range and depth of partnerships with employers, the professions and other educational providers' and to 'enhance ... regional impact through more effective and extensive partnership and community engagement'. The University does not have a discreet strategy which articulates its plans, but the ELIR team found that the overall approach to collaborative partnerships effectively aligns with the strategy map. In meetings with the ELIR team, some staff characterised the University's approach as being one of caution while planning for growth.

136 The institution's collaborative provision has three main foci: widening participation partnerships through articulation agreements with colleges; work-related partnerships, including the credit-rating of external provision and graduate apprenticeships (see paragraphs 40 and 112); and a small number of international collaborations. In connection with the latter, the institution has recently reviewed its approach to transnational education (TNE) which it views as part of its international business and economic development strategy. Arising from this review, the University has removed non-productive relationships and agreements and now has two active and successful partnerships, reduced speculative activity, determined to improve and grow its two remaining TNE partnerships with Informatics Institute of Technology (IIT) in Sri Lanka, and Benedict International Group, Switzerland and build on new opportunities focusing on two key countries. The University has also adopted an industry-informed approach to identify developments in two priority sectors with several cross-sectoral themes. It anticipates that this review will result in a new TNE strategy to be rolled out later in 2020-21. In accordance with its College Engagement Strategy, the University has extended its articulation arrangements and substantially increased articulation routes. Overall, therefore, the University is building a strategic approach to the development of its collaborative activity.

137 At the time of the 2016 ELIR, the University was restructuring roles and responsibilities, including those for aspects of collaborative activity. It was also further enhancing institutional oversight of its collaborations through reviewing arrangements for consideration, approval, monitoring and review. The ELIR team could see that progress had been made in those aspects. The 2016 ELIR recommended that the University 'continue to develop the operational infrastructure and strategic approach to the management and oversight of collaborative activity'. In committee terms, ultimate responsibility lies with Academic Council. The Academic Development Committee provides institutional and operational oversight, and grants initial approval using a triage system for assessing opportunities. Formal approval, monitoring and review closely follow the processes outlined in section 4 (see paragraphs 110-122) for all university courses. The Associate Vice-Principal Business and Economic Development (BAED) supported by the Department of BAED leads on TNE developments linking with academic schools and the Department for Governance and Academic Quality. The BAED, through its Graduate Apprenticeships section, has responsibility for the strategic development of graduate apprenticeship work-based learning partnerships. Validated courses and credit-rated provision are managed effectively through schools and routine quality processes. Articulation agreements between the University's undergraduate provision and UK further education colleges are coordinated by Access Unit (which was moved in academic year 2020-21 from DELTA to Student Recruitment). Articulation arrangements with overseas partners are also coordinated by Student Recruitment. Although it was reported at the time of the 2016 ELIR that the University was considering the establishment of a 'partnership unit' to provide oversight of collaborative arrangements, this did not materialise. The University will wish to maintain strategic oversight of the management arrangements for its collaborative activity to ensure that they remain fit-for-purpose as it continues to develop its portfolio of collaborative activity.

138 The University collaborative activity involved a limited number of collaborative partners at the time of the 2016 ELIR. Long-standing arrangements include those with NESCol and Navitas for the ICRGU, which provide extensive access links into the University's undergraduate and master's courses. The collaboration with the Benedict International Group in Lucerne and Zurich has a mature portfolio which has expanded since 2016. Relationships with the Informatics Institute of Technology in Sri Lanka, Human Development Scotland, Edinburgh College and an expanded network of further education colleges have all been developed, resulting in an expansion of partnership course student numbers.

139 Broadly, proposal, approval and reapproval processes follow a similar procedure to those for non-collaborative proposals. These are set out in section five of the Academic Quality Handbook which was revised in March 2021. Financial plans, due diligence, risk assessments and arrangements for annual and periodic review are robust and meet the Expectations of the UK Quality Code. The University has templates for Memoranda of Understanding contracts of collaboration and for termination of partnership arrangements which meet sector norms. The ELIR team was able to confirm from reviewing sample documentation that institutional requirements were met. In discussions with the ELIR team staff demonstrated a sound understanding of approval, monitoring and external examining arrangements for collaborative provision. Following a periodic review of the ICRGU and a QAA Educational Oversight - Exceptional Arrangements review (which had positive judgements) there are now clearer links with university quality structures, which ensure effective engagement of both parties and aid student transition. The University maintains a register of its collaborative provision for taught credit-rated provision.

140 For some collaborations there is a Partnership Steering Group. In mapping its provision to the UK Quality Code advice and guidance for partnerships, the University indicated that 'new steering group arrangements being implemented across all collaborative arrangements will be referenced in the Academic Quality Handbook'. The Partnership

Steering Group comprises senior members for each partner and, in addition to normal quality processes, ensures contract monitoring and compliance. It was evident to the ELIR team that some Partnership Steering Groups had been formed. However, in meetings with staff there was uneven knowledge and understanding of Partnership Steering Groups and their application to all collaborative arrangements; the groups were not referenced in the recent revision of the relevant section of the Academic Quality Handbook. Evidence provided to the ELIR team suggested that they were likely to be effective in enabling the institution to manage collaborations and maintain and enhance quality and standards.

141 The University requires the appointment of a Link Co-ordinator for the general operation and monitoring of a collaboration. The role is critical in securing standards and enhancing the student experience, ensuring that students have a designated contact at the University for feedback. The role has a clear specification which, at the time of the current ELIR, was recently updated. In discussions with the ELIR team staff showed a good understanding of the role and were in regular contact with the partner organisation. The Link Co-ordinator Report Form is clear and robust and used in annual monitoring. In addition, the RGU Insights dashboards provide information on student performance and progress to the Link Co-ordinator which is reviewed during annual monitoring purposes. It was evident to the ELIR team that appropriate regard is given to partnership activity in annual and periodic monitoring processes.

142 In discussions with the ELIR team, students who had transitioned to the University through articulation or other advanced standing arrangements and students on graduate apprenticeships were positive about their experience and the dedicated transition support which was available. To facilitate transition, the University has restructured courses to manage expectations and integrate students into existing cohorts. Assessment practices have also been adapted to enhance authenticity. The views of students studying with partners is sought through evaluation questionnaires, the analysis of which feeds into annual appraisal mechanisms. Staff availability and the support for transitions between years were commented on favourably.

5.2 Effectiveness of the approach to managing collaborative provision

143 The University has an effective approach to managing its current partnership provision, securing academic standards and enhancing the student learning experience. Its approach has been mapped against the Quality Code and it has identified areas for future enhancement. Opportunities and associated risks are carefully weighed. The new approach to TNE is the result of careful analysis. The University is aware of areas in need of further development to support its approach.

QAA2626 - R10973 - Aug 21

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2021
18 Bothwell Street, Glasgow G2 6NU
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786
www.gaa.ac.uk