



Enhancement-led Institutional Review of The Robert Gordon University

Outcome Report

April 2016

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About the Enhancement-led Institutional Review method

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

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

About this review

This is the Outcome Report of the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at The Robert Gordon University. The review took place as follows: Part 1 visit on 16 to 18 March 2016 and Part 2 visit on 25 to 29 April 2016. The review was conducted by a team of six reviewers:

- Mr Brian Green (Academic Reviewer)
- Dr Abigail Hind (Academic Reviewer)
- Professor Paddy Maher (Academic Reviewer)
- Dr Roy Ferguson (International Reviewer)
- Ms Jeanine Sogaard-Forland (Student Reviewer)
- Mr Tony Platt (Coordinating Reviewer).

This report sets out the overarching judgement formed by the ELIR team 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.

It is possible for the overarching judgement to be expressed in three levels which indicate that the institution's arrangements are: effective; have limited effectiveness; or are not effective. More detail on these categories is provided in the ELIR information document.

The overarching judgement for this report can be found on page 3, followed by the areas of positive practice and the areas for development.

A more detailed [Technical Report](#) is also available for this review.⁴ The Technical Report sets out the ELIR team's findings under each of the headings in the ELIR 3 method.

¹ Further information about the ELIR method:

www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/enhancement-led-institutional-review.

² Further information about QAA: www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us.

³ ELIR information document: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=61.

⁴ Technical report: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/provider?UKPRN=10005500

About The Robert Gordon University

The Robert Gordon University (RGU/the University) gained university status in 1992, but traces its origins and role in the community back to the educational work of the Aberdeen merchant and benefactor, Robert Gordon (1668-1731), after whom it is named. Its mission is 'to transform people and communities'. It sees itself as a focused rather than general university, concentrating on subject areas that are aligned with the needs of industry, business and public services. Sixty-two per cent of the University's programmes are approved by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs).

The University's academic structure is based on three faculties: Design and Technology, Health and Social Care, and the Aberdeen Business School. Each faculty contains a number of schools and departments and is led by a dean. The deans are line-managed by the Deputy Principal and Vice-Chancellor (Academic Development and Quality).

In 2014-15, the University had a total student population of 17,198 (headcount), of whom 62 per cent were studying at undergraduate level. Of the 38 per cent postgraduate students, 36 per cent were taught postgraduates and 2 per cent postgraduate research students. The student body has a strong international component with nearly one-third of all students coming from outside the UK (1,679 from the EU and 3,787 overseas students). Part-time students made up 41 per cent of the total student population and, of those, 83 per cent were online distance learners.

Overarching judgement about The Robert Gordon University

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

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

Areas of positive practice

1 The ELIR has identified a number of areas of positive practice and these are summarised below.

2 **Clarity of vision and strategy** – the University's strategic approach to developing and implementing its distinctive and focused mission is clearly understood by staff and students. It is communicated effectively and used proactively to: develop operational plans at institutional, school and faculty level; guide staff development and performance review processes; shape arrangements for annual appraisal and Institution-Led Subject Review; and determine institutional priorities for enhancement.

3 **Commitment to widening access** – there is a strong commitment and effective approach to widening participation, as demonstrated by proactive outreach strategies and collaborative initiatives which are specifically designed to support non-traditional students in accessing the University.

4 **Student representation and partnership working** – the University has an effective and proactive partnership with RGU:Union. A number of student roles have been established to enhance representation and engagement including student faculty officers and students acting as interns on enhancement projects. A particularly positive development has been the use of the Student Partnership Agreement as a foundation for the development of the Staff and Student Charter at Gray's School of Art, which sets out the respective responsibilities and expectations of staff and students around learning, teaching, assessment and opportunities for personal development. Students are recognised and rewarded for their engagement with enhancement activities through Student Contribution and Involvement Awards and the University's credit-bearing Extracurricular Award. Students are also active in recognising staff contribution through the student-led Support Teaching Appreciation and Recognition (STAR) awards.

5 **Employability and approaches to work-related experience** – the University has a network of established and embedded relationships with employers and PSRBs. These links complement the curriculum, are recognised and valued by staff and students, and form the basis of embedded and diverse opportunities for work-related experience. Of particular note, is the University's Talent Exchange initiative, which aims to widen work-related experience opportunities by connecting local businesses and organisations, specifically Small to Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), with students and staff.

6 **Enhancement Themes** – a strategic and proactive engagement with the national Enhancement Themes is demonstrated through the range of current transition projects focusing on the specific needs of students who are making the transition into and through the University. There is also significant evidence of the University using the outcomes of previous Enhancement Themes to inform its own policies and practice.

7 **Identifying and sharing good practice** – the University has a systematic approach to identifying and disseminating good practice through formal and informal means including the organisation of committee structures, establishment of staff roles with a remit for enhancement, and a range of informal activities and networks designed to promote and share good practice. The Department for Learning, Teaching and Access (DELTA) plays a key role in this activity, and is particularly valued by University staff.

8 **Approach to quality assurance and quality enhancement** – the University has comprehensive and robust arrangements for annual appraisal and periodic Institution-Led Subject Review (ILSR) and the consideration of outcomes from these processes. This is complemented by annual monitoring and periodic Student-Facing Support Services Review (SFSSR) which cut across organisational boundaries. Annual and periodic processes are overseen effectively by the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee with the operational support of the Academic Affairs department, including the faculty quality officers. A particularly positive development has been student partnership in the SFSSR of IT services, which was well received by staff and students and will inform the approach taken to subsequent enhancement of the student experience. Action taken as a result of the SFSSR continues to have significant student engagement/involvement after the original review event.

9 **Self-evaluation and the effective strategic use of data** – the University makes effective use of a comprehensive data set to monitor and analyse institutional effectiveness across the totality of the student lifecycle, measured against strategic priorities and indicators. The data set, alongside the results of student surveys, at module, course, school and University levels, is used to identify areas for development and potential good practice. Data is easily accessible, with bespoke reports available through DELTA's analytics team to examine data based on groups with particular characteristics, for example international students or students entering the University through widening participation routes.

Areas for development

10 The University is asked to consider the areas summarised below.

11 **Consistency of practice in assessment and feedback** – building on policy work to clarify minimum expectations of staff and students on the threshold standards for assessment and feedback, continue to minimise the pockets of variability in assessment practices. The University should continue to reflect on the ways in which assessment expectations are communicated to students; variability in the implementation of approved procedures for marking moderation can be reduced; and issues around the timing and quality of feedback can be addressed across schools. The University is encouraged to use the implementation of online assessment, where appropriate, to review assessment practice and identify areas for improvement.

12 **Graduate School** – during the transition to a single Graduate School, continue to evaluate the extent to which the move meets the University's aims to facilitate a more consistent postgraduate research student experience and strengthen the research culture and community. The University should pay particular attention to the needs of existing postgraduate students transitioning to the new structure and make progress with the implementation of revised arrangements for periodic review of research degree provision.

13 **Support for online distance learners** – following the positive work that has been carried out to enhance the use of the virtual learning environment for online distance learners, continue to support staff development in blended learning practice as well as ensuring that there is effective operational support for a growing online, off-campus

community. There would be value in considering the views of online distance learners on the pace of learning, to ensure that programme delivery and organisation is flexible enough to meet the varying needs of this student group.

14 **Role of Learning Enhancement Coordinators and Teaching Fellows** – complete, and implement the outcomes arising from, the review of these academic roles to maximise the effectiveness of the coordination and leadership of learning enhancement activity within the University, building on the experience and learning gained from the existing networks of Learning Enhancement Coordinators and Teaching Fellows.

15 **Collaborative provision** – building on recent work undertaken to consider arrangements for the consideration, approval, monitoring and review of collaborative activity, and in view of the University's strategic intention to expand the number of partnership links, continue to develop the operational infrastructure and strategic approach to the management and oversight of collaborative activity.

What happens next?

16 QAA Scotland will continue to engage with the institution through the annual discussion visits which, among other matters, consider the ways in which the institution is responding to the ELIR outcomes.

17 One year after publication of the ELIR Outcome and Technical Reports, institutions are asked to provide a follow-up report to indicate how they are responding to the outcomes of ELIR. Institutions also engage in a follow-up event with colleagues from other institutions to explore the ways in which the ELIR outcomes are being implemented. The final version of the institution's follow-up report is published on the QAA website.

Further information

18 A more detailed [Technical Report](#) is also available for this review. The Technical Report sets out the ELIR team's findings under each of the headings in the ELIR 3 method.

19 This review and its findings relate to the institution as a whole and do not provide information about individual programmes of study or subjects. For further information about those, contact the institution or visit its [website](#).

20 University sector institutions in Scotland also engage in systematic Enhancement Theme activity. Further information about that work, which has a sector-wide and institutional focus, can be found on the [Enhancement Themes website](#).

21 Further information about QAA Scotland and the enhancement-led approach, including the ELIR method, can be found on the [QAA website](#).

22 For further information about the Scottish Funding Council see www.sfc.ac.uk.

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