



University of Aberdeen

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

March 2015

Preface

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

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

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

University of Aberdeen

Year-on Response to the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR)

March 2015

1 Introduction

1.1 Governing Body Endorsement

This Report was endorsement by the Court at its meeting of 24 March 2015.

1.2 ELIR 2013 Outcome

The University of Aberdeen ELIR 3 was undertaken in autumn 2013. The ELIR Outcome Report confirms the University has 'effective arrangements for managing academic standards and the student learning experience' and notes that 'these arrangements are likely to continue to be effective in future'.

The University was pleased to see that the institutional priorities identified in the Reflective Analysis (RA) were endorsed in the ELIR reports, and that the ELIR reviewers noted the 'transformational effect' of our Curriculum Reform (CREF) Project commenting that it was 'catalyst for a range of other positive initiatives'. Further, we were heartened that the report commented upon institutional good practice across the learning and teaching spectrum, from a 'clear focus for academic development' to 'systematic arrangements being in place for providing student support' to our 'imaginative' and 'responsive to student views' development of our MyAberdeen virtual learning environment (VLE). We were particularly pleased that students confirmed to the ELIR Panel that 'academic and non-academic support was readily available' and that 'staff are encouraging and approachable and make considerable effort to ensure students have a positive experience'. The ELIR Report also recognised the 'positive and constructive relationship with the Aberdeen University Students' Association' and that students indicated that they 'feel listened to as the University is responsive to feedback' provided through formal and informal channels.

1.3 Monitoring and Evaluation of ELIR Report

The ELIR report was considered by the University Management Group, presented to Senate and made available to all staff and students. Following discussions led by the University Committee for Teaching and Learning (UCTL) and chaired by the Vice-Principal (Learning and Teaching), actions were agreed and fed into the development of the Learning and Teaching Operational Plan. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the actions is managed by the UCTL.

This report has been developed under the auspices of the UCTL. Contributions from the University's ELIR Steering Group, of which the Students' Association President for Education and Employability is a member, and also from the Centre for Academic Development, Registry and the Directorate of Student Life have been included in our response. A draft was considered by UCTL and Senate at their February 2015 meetings.

2 Response to ELIR 2013

The ELIR report asked the University to consider six areas for development:

- Evaluating success of initiatives
- Support for a more diverse student population
- Pace of responding
- Strengthening the links between assurance and enhancement
- Availability of information
- Detailed use of external reference points

2.1 Evaluating success of initiatives - *give more detailed consideration to effective ways of evaluating the implementation of its significant initiatives, such as Curriculum Reform and the data management project, OneSource. Doing this from the outset would, among other things, provide a clearer baseline against which the University could consider the effects of implementation.*

In the Reflective Analysis (RA) and as evidenced in our supporting Case Study, we explained that as an institution we recognise the importance of 'taking stock' and assessing the impact our activities. Indeed, the ELIR Outcome Report mentions our 'culture of self-reflection and critical self-evaluation' which supports 'significant transformational projects for the benefit of the entire University community'.

We continue to advance our efforts in this area. We are currently revising our project management methodology, incorporating lessons learned from some of our more institution-wide projects such as CREF, OneSource and the restructuring of the academic year. Evaluation of projects is now a fundamental aspect of this process and this ethos of self-reflection and evaluation will be more firmly entrenched in projects from the outset going forward. A draft Project Management Handbook is under development.

2.2 Support for a more diverse student population - *in the context of the University's plans to promote widening participation and diversify its student population, progress a range of intended actions including those related to internationalisation and broadening its analysis of progression rates to include part-time and postgraduate students. The University is also asked to consider the access for part-time students to student support services, such as the Student Learning Service, out of core hours.*

We opened our new International Centre in January 2015 which we hope will further raise the profile of the University's international activity and as such encourage greater involvement in 'international' by all students. All study abroad opportunities are advertised and promoted through the Centre, which is also a locus for events to help integrate international students with the wider student population, for instance by celebrating national events such as Chinese New Year. Planning for an internationalisation Week in spring 2015 is already well underway. The Centre also recognises the additional support which international students need from time to time and internationalisation will be integral in further enhancing student induction.

Work to further integrate the Erasmus and International Exchange opportunities for students has taken place, with a Kaizen Blitz contributing to development. The international exchange programme has been opened up allowing students to study for not just one academic year but also for a single semester. Our range of partners has increased to include partners in China, Australia and Japan.

We continue to actively enhance links and strengthen relationships with a range of organisations with a widening participation focus, most recently becoming a partner in the development of a Children's University (CU) Centre for Aberdeen City and Shire. The CU Centre aims to promote social mobility by providing high quality out-of-school-hours activities to children aged 7 to 14 and engaging the wider communities as learning partners in this process.

As of academic year 2014-2015 we have included postgraduate taught and research students in our analysis of non-continuation, and as part of our work on Scottish Funding Council (SFC) Outcome Agreements we have extend this analysis to include part-time students. In doing so, we have found that our current student record database does not hold the postgraduate data in particular in an easily accessible or meaningful form. As such a business case has been submitted to our OneSource project team for the monitoring and progression of all postgraduate research students, regardless of mode of study.

The University continues to seek to improve our online provision and mechanisms for students to engage with all our support services outwith 'normal' working hours. In particular the Student Learning Service (SLS) has enhanced the e-resources for academic skills development, academic writing and maths skills, which are available in MyAberdeen. In summer 2014, the SLS received Learning & Teaching Enhancement Programme internal funding to employ a student intern to assist in the creation of online maths resources specifically for Engineering students.

The Careers Service offers a 'late night opening' on Tuesday evenings, and the Students' Association's Student Advice Centre has also begun to offer evening support sessions.

2.3 Pace of responding - *consider its responsiveness to external feedback. Specifically, the University is asked to prioritise implementing the intended revisions to the Common Assessment Scheme and implement the Annual Programme review process in 2014 as intended.*

As the ELIR Technical Report identifies, we have an 'effective strategic approach to enhancing learning and teaching' and a Learning & Teaching Operational Plan that is 'live and dynamic'. We firmly believe that substantial change has to be carefully scheduled with regard to time, resource and competing priorities.

This is exemplified by our 2014-2015 introductions of a new, alpha-numeric Common Grading Scale (CGS), and a revised grade point average (GPA) method for determining classification and award of undergraduate and postgraduate taught degrees¹. Whilst we were of a mind to replace our Common Assessment Scale at an earlier stage, given the volume of change being introduced as a result of CREF in particular, we did not wish to impose further significant change on staff and students at an already exceptionally busy time. Had we done so, it would have also made any evaluation of the changes to assessment much trickier to assess. Consequently we delayed implementation of the assessment changes until this academic year. Specifically, the CGS was introduced to all students in September 2014, and the GPA degree classification process will have a staggered implementation. To evaluate these changes, and to measure their impact, we intend to run both our current grade spectrum approach to classification and award in parallel with the GPA approach in the first few years of implementation, to ensure the new system does not significantly advantage nor disadvantage students. The CGS Implementation Group meets regularly to monitor the impact of the new scale and classification tool and address any unforeseen queries and/or issues in this regard.

The University considers annual programme monitoring (review) to be a process which incorporates feedback from students via student course evaluation forms and staff:student liaison committees, annual course review and external examiner feedback. We are continuing to implement our annual programme review and since the ELIR Panel's visit have already revised both our External Examining reporting content and procedures, and our process for annual course review to strengthen the quality enhancement component of each. The impact of changes will be kept under review by the Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) and the UCTL, and will feed into our plans, in due course, for an enhanced Internal Teaching Review.

We are currently working to improve the pace at which changes can be made to teaching, learning and assessment via our process for approving new (or changes to) courses and programmes (SENAS). The existing process is a multi-layered serial process that has evolved to fulfil a number of different functions. While the current process provides a high level of quality assurance, the impact of evolution rather than redesign is a process that is repetitive, slow, and insufficiently flexible to meet the demands of the rapidly changing environment. Proposals to revise the workflow, content, and timelines associated with the approval process, with the aims of creating a process that is more flexible and reactive, are, at this time, working their way through committee and we hope to have these changes in place for academic year 2015-2016. The impact of these revisions will be kept under review by the QAC and the UCTL.

2.4 Strengthening the links between assurance and enhancement – *continue to develop more explicit links between the University's assurance processes and its enhancement activities to capitalise on the benefits of both.*

We seek continually to develop and strengthen the links between quality assurance and quality enhancement processes as exemplified by the changes referred to above in regard to annual monitoring and course and programme approval processes.

2.5 Availability of information – *related to the review of its committee structure, the University is encouraged to make its committee minutes and papers more promptly and widely accessible to staff.*

We are aware that our College- and School-based committee minutes and papers are not as widely accessible to staff as we would wish, and we are seeking to enhance the speed and accessibility of such institutional documentation as part of our ongoing Committees Review. At College/School level the Colleges of Arts and Social Science (CASS) and Life Sciences and Medicine (CLSM) have taken advantage of the wider document management opportunities that SharePoint provides and now each has a single repository for College and School level committee papers, amongst other things. This has provided a single gateway for access, opportunity for greater collaboration and sharing, and version control.

¹ www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/code-of-practice-2014-2831.php

In addition, the University is in the very early stages of developing a Digital Strategy, and accessibility of committee documentation will be considered as part of its development.

2.6 Detailed use of external reference points - *enhance its practice in the use and detailed scrutiny of external reference points in the programme proposal and approval process. In particular there would be benefit in promoting more explicit engagement by staff with subject benchmark statements and other reference points. This is in the context of the University, overall, meeting sector expectations in its use of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.*

We mention earlier in section 2.3 our work to revise our SENAS course and programme approval process. Whilst the ELIR Technical Report commented that our SENAS forms are 'well-structured and comprehensive' we feel that there is opportunity to redesign the content to further strengthen the links between course developments and subject benchmarks. As such the new process will be more explicit in requesting details of learning outcomes and their alignment with subject benchmarks and other external reference points such as PSRB accreditation requirements. As part of the roll out and implementation of the new process, we will be looking at professional development opportunities to encourage and develop staff skills in this regard.

3. Update on areas of positive practice

3.1 Curriculum reform

Our first cohort of students to graduate under our new curriculum regime did so in July 2014. Feedback from this group indicated that they felt there was too much breadth in their honours years as a result of enhanced study. As such we are looking to provide more appropriate, cognate offerings for enhanced study courses at levels 3 and 4. To this end we are pursuing a student-led approach; we are encouraging School Conveners, our 'super reps', to suggest a list of potential 6th Century courses to the Vice-Principal (Learning & Teaching) (VPL&T), and the Undergraduate Committee will meet to consider the feasibility of each suggestion and the extent to which they meet the requirements of CREF.

3.2 Evaluation leading to transformational change

The University is currently developing a new Strategic Plan, due to be published in time for the start of the 2015-2016 academic year. It is being developed through comprehensive consultation with the entire University community and with key external stakeholders. Learning and teaching issues are a central feature of the process and staff development issues have been particularly prominent in shaping the early discussions.

In developing the 'My Curriculum' tool in OneSource we have been forced to clarify our processes and get more consistency across the institution, removing ambiguity inherent in our procedures. This has helped facilitate a more consistent understanding of what is required of our policies and procedures.

We continue to reflect and evaluate at the operational level also. Our Business Improvement Team encourages and enables cross-institutional collaboration to resolve issues and achieve improved practices. Since ELIR 3 we have undertaken Kaizen Blitz methodology to enhance the student experience including making it easier for postgraduate research students to apply for scholarships; reducing the quantity of library fines imposed on students; better coordination of Medical and Dental School volunteers; decreasing the response time for Postgraduate taught applications and refurbishing teaching spaces amongst others.

3.3 Optimising the use of the Virtual Learning Environment - MyAberdeen

We have continued to develop MyAberdeen in response to feedback from students and staff, and to support wider institutional initiatives. For example, the provision of online communication and collaboration spaces to support the Personal Tutor scheme, developing the MyAberdeen Grade Centre to support the new common grading scale and enhance the provision of feedback on assessment to students and working with staff in the School of Languages & Literature and the OneSource team to deliver diagnostic tests in Spanish and French which inform students' choice of language courses. MyAberdeen developments continue to be overseen by the MyAberdeen Steering Group and e-learning work more generally by the Centre for Academic Development's Management and Advisory boards.

As previously mentioned, the University is in the very early stages of developing a Digital Strategy, and the use of MyAberdeen will be part of its development.

3.4 Systematic student support

In response to survey feedback from both Personal Tutors (PTs) and tutees following the first year of operation (2013-2014), a range of enhancements have been made to the PT Scheme for 2014-2015. These include improved channels of communication, centrally scheduled meetings by the PT Support Team and developments within the student record system to improve administrative processes to free up the PT Support Team to better support PTs and tutees. PT developments are overseen by the Personal Tutor Steering Group which, since September 2014, has included all School Conveners amongst its membership. This has helped staff and students develop a shared sense of ownership and belonging to the PT scheme.

Since ELIR 3 our peer mentoring scheme, Students 4 Students (S4S), has been rolled out across the institution and is now available to all incoming first years. We are currently in the process of collating feedback from our 170 student mentors on student engagement in the scheme. To date, S4S has been a real success story and now forms a central part of the transition all first year students make to higher education. Moreover, this scheme is feeding into the next iteration of our Strategic Plan.

Our Directorate of Student Life has secured the services of 'Big White Wall' (BWW), to provide 24/7 online support for students, particularly those experiencing mental distress outwith normal working hours. BWW is an online community of people who are anxious, down or not coping who support and help each other by sharing what's troubling them, guided by trained professionals. In accordance with the standards of the Buttle Trust, the Directorate has also developed an action plan to address the specific needs of care leavers. This includes guaranteeing 365 day accommodation for the duration of their programme of study and offering personalised support prior to the start of term, and ongoing support throughout their studies. The introduction of a Night Management Team in University accommodation this academic year is providing additional support for residents outwith University outside core hours of operation.

3.5 Promoting employability and graduate attributes

We remain committed to developing the employability of all our students. In this vein we have devised a professional skills programme to run alongside the academic curriculum. This new, online course has been approved by the QAC and will be available in the first instance to undergraduate students from September 2015. The topics currently being prepared include developing your graduate attributes, presenting yourself to employers, finding work experience and career planning, graduate jobs and postgraduate study. Students will be guided as to which topics should be completed at various stages of their programme of study, with the expectation that the course will be completed by the end of 3rd year. The course will be non-credit bearing but it will be strongly recommended and it is anticipated that successful completion will feature in the enhanced transcript (see below).

In January 2014 a review of our School/Discipline based Programme Advisory Boards (PABs) was undertaken to explore and summarise each PAB's activity with external organisations including alumni. A digest of PAB activities for dissemination across the PAB network to share good practice was subsequently produced².

Our STAR (Students Taking Active Roles) Award and Career Mentoring Scheme both go from strength to strength. STAR graduates in 2013-2014 doubled in size from the previous year, a trend predicted to rise in 2014-2015. A new Bioscience Research Stream mentoring stream has been created, and since the inception of the Career Mentoring Scheme in 2011, more than 500 undergraduates and taught postgraduates have completed this employability-enhancing initiative.

July 2014 saw the introduction of an Enhanced Transcript for students at the end of their studies. It supports and expands on students' CVs and degree certificates by recording not just their courses and grades and University prizes, but also approved co-curricular activities such as the STAR Award and the Aberdeen Internship Programme.

The Careers Service Employer Board and UCTL continue to monitor and advise on our activities to enhance employability and graduate attributes, and we were delighted in March 2014 to have received the Association

² www.abdn.ac.uk/careers/staff/programme-advisory-boards-377.php

of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) Award for Excellence in Careers Service Engagement³ in recognition of our close partnership working with Shell International Ltd.

3.6 Student partnership

We very much value our 'positive and constructive relationship' with the Students' Association (SA) as was noted in the ELIR Outcome Report. We are currently consulting with the SA and wider student body to aid the development of the new Strategic Plan. Following the success of a meeting of School Conveners with the Principal and VP (L&T), the VP L&T has now instigated regular 'catch ups' with the School Conveners to discuss ideas to enhance both the academic and non-academic student experience.

3.7 Clear focus for academic development

As alluded to in our Reflective Analysis, and following 18 months of development, the Centre for Academic Development (CAD) received accreditation by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in September 2014 for its new Continuing Professional Development Framework for Learning & Teaching (CPDLTF)⁴. Open to all staff with teaching and / or learning support experience, the Framework offers three flexible routes to professional recognition by the HEA, at Associate, Fellow and Senior Fellow level. The Framework is aligned fully with the UK Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning in H.E.

To ensure that CAD is providing the most appropriate professional development opportunities for staff, and to inform the planning and prioritisation of the Centre's activities, a University-wide consultation exercise was undertaken in spring 2014. This provided CAD with an opportunity to increase awareness about the services that it offers, and to identify expertise across the institution which could be used to share and promote good practice in all areas. The outcomes were wide-ranging and a series of recommendations are being progressed. These include the development of a matrix which articulates professional development pathways with corresponding development opportunities; and, working with IT, Hr and others, establishing a more unified approach to planning, promoting and delivering workshops, training and other development opportunities across the institution.

3.8 Internal teaching review

As the ELIR Panel identified, our internal teaching review (ITR) process provides 'methodical and detailed critical analysis of discipline areas'. As we develop our annual monitoring processes (section 2.3) we intend to extend the more enhancement-led approach contained therein to our ITR provision. We also have plans to develop an ITR-like periodic review process for our Professional Services, for implementation in academic year 2015-2016. These Professional Services reviews will be overseen by the Directors Group and will report into the University Management Group.

4. Recent developments at the University

Recent developments not alluded to above include the appointment of a three new cross-college project groups in relation to Retention, Feedback, and Positive Outcomes. Each project group comprises membership from academic and professional services, and student representation. Membership reflects those areas that have a clear record of success as well as those where the data are below what would be expected. Where the chairs of these groups are not members of UCTL they have been co-opted to the committee for the duration of the project group.

5. Conclusion

We are grateful for the guidance of the ELIR Panel and the constructive commentary provided in the Technical and Outcome Reports. Since ELIR 2013 we have continued to engage in a significant number of initiatives aimed at enhancing the student experience and maintaining the quality of our learning and teaching provision. As we move forward and develop our strategic priorities for the next 5 years we intend to build on this momentum and ensure that our learning and teaching provision continues to meet the varied needs of learners in the 21st century.

³ www.abdn.ac.uk/news/6019/

⁴ www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/cpd-framework-3057.php

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