



## **University of Abertay Dundee**

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

**October 2017**

#### **Preface**

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

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

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



## Enhancement-Led Institutional Review: Follow-up Report

### 1. Introduction

QAA Scotland conducted an Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) of Abertay University during March and April 2016, with the QAA's reports of this review being published in August 2016. The overarching judgement was that the 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.

Following receipt of the ELIR reports, the University's ELIR Steering Group<sup>1</sup> drew up an overarching action plan (with named individuals identified as responsible for progressing each component of the plan) in response to the matters identified in the ELIR reports as areas for development. The process of creating the action plan was informed by a University-wide seminar on 'Learning from ELIR' held on 7 September 2016 organised and facilitated by the Teaching & Learning Enhancement service. Academic and professional services staff from across the University participated in this seminar.

The action plan arising from the Steering Group and the discussions at the seminar, was submitted to the University's Teaching & Learning Committee on 28 September 2016 and was approved. After this, the Steering Group met on a number of occasions and the senior staff leading on various responses have produced more detailed plans for each of the main items arising from the ELIR report. This ongoing work of the Steering Group is being monitored by the Teaching & Learning Committee and thence by Senate.

This Follow-up Report has been prepared by the ELIR Steering Group. The Students' Association sabbatical officers who were members of the steering group had both completed their terms of office at the point of its preparation. However, the out-going President supported the in-coming President to contribute to the writing of and commenting upon drafts of this report.

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<sup>1</sup> The ELIR Steering Group membership includes the Vice-Principal (Academic), all Heads of School, the Directors of Student Services, Information Services, Planning, and Teaching and Learning Enhancement, the Registrar, the Academic Quality Manager, the Academic Governance Manager and the President and Vice-President of the Students' Association.

## 2. Main areas in which action has been taken since ELIR

### 2.1 Evaluating institutional change

The ELIR Outcome Report indicated that the University should evaluate the “*significant strategic changes that have taken place*”. In response to the recommendation, the proposed approach has been to ensure that the University’s current planning and performance monitoring processes fully reflect, and allow monitoring of, significant institutional change. The approach is to embed this into existing (re-designing where necessary) institutional processes for monitoring of performance against the University’s strategic plan and institutional strategies, rather than to create a separate process.

During session 2016/17, the University developed a high-level three year operational plan which was finalised and shared with staff in June 2017. This was informed by an evaluation of progress against strategic plan objectives and analysis of other issues which emerged through the planning process. The operational plan provides an agreed framework for monitoring progress over the next three years. A new process has been put in place to support Heads of School and Service in delivering their objectives and enabling Executive and the collective Senior Management Group (SMG) to monitor progress. In addition to routine reporting to the Executive Group, SMG will consider this twice a year at Planning Meetings in December and March, In December 2017 SMG will review progress and priorities for the coming year and in March 2018 will consider any changes to operational plans. The University’s KPIs were reviewed in the first half of 2017 as part of this process and following approval of the revised set by Court in June 2017, these will now be rolled down to School-level in autumn 2017. We are also undertaking a light-touch portfolio review, to be completed in November 2017 which will be informed by programme level data linked to strategic plan priority areas and therefore overlapping with the KPI information.

The University continued to monitor and reflect on policy and practice in light of the changes that have been introduced at Abertay over the past five years. For example, in November 2016, Teaching and Learning Committee discussed a report from the Registrar on the distribution of module grades, to determine the impact of the grading scheme, and the revised regulations, on student performance. The Committee was pleased to note an overall improvement in attainment and a reduction in the number of fail grades and ‘incomplete’ grades, but expressed some concern at a rise in ‘non-submission’ grades since the introduction of the new regulations. In May 2017, the Committee considered and approved an amendment to the regulations around non-submission to allow for retrieval opportunities and support student progression.

The impact of the Grade Point Average on degree classification was also discussed by the Teaching and Learning Committee in May 2017, and a short-life working group has been established to consider the impact on some students of including fail grades in the calculation. The University is assured that overall the GPA system is producing classifications in line with expectations, and provides the University’s graduates with a more finely-grained outcome than the traditional honours classification.

## 2.2 Institution-led review

The ELIR Outcome Report stated that the University should “...ensure the quality review exercise the University has planned for 2017-18 is not only a review of the curriculum reform project but also meets all of the guidance for institution-led review”. The Review Team also felt it would be opportune for Abertay to reflect on annual monitoring following curriculum reform and the changes to the organisational structure to ensure that these fit with the revised institution-led review arrangements.

During the ELIR visits, Abertay laid out plans to conduct Institution-Led Reviews (ILRs) of all our taught credit-bearing provision in the 2017/18 academic year. This followed a brief hiatus in ILR activity relating to taught provision whilst the University underwent a complete portfolio review and curriculum reform. The 2017/18 activity will ensure that all credit-bearing provision is reviewed following SFC guidance and will also evaluate the first year of the new curricula, including institutional lessons to be learnt about the approach and operationalisation of the curriculum reform exercise.

A detailed action plan, including specific objectives, was created in relation to this area for development. These objectives included developing a statement of the purpose and principles of ILR at Abertay benchmarked to the SFC guidance to higher education institutions on quality from August 2012 and Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. The purpose and principles, along with agreement that the Division would be the unit of assessment, were approved at Abertay’s Teaching and Learning Committee in September 2016 and subsequently approved at Senate in October 2016.

Timelines were established along with a panel to oversee the process (the Quality Management Steering Group, see section 2.3). All guidance from previous cycles of review at Abertay was reviewed and revised to ensure that it reflected the newly developed purpose and principles. There was a comprehensive approach to involving staff at all levels in reviewing and revising the previous guidance, with meetings held throughout December 2016 to seek views. These meetings led to the creation of an ILR handbook for 2017/18 with a suggested documentation template which has been disseminated to all Divisions. The template specifically asks Divisions to reflect on provision since their previous ILR (called Quality Review at that time) as well as evaluate the first year of curriculum reform in terms of the student experience and whether the intended outcomes of curriculum reform have been met.

Abertay University also participated in the QAA Focus-On: ILR event in January 2017. This was useful in sharing practice with other institutions which shaped our thinking, particularly in the area of involving students in ILR. For this cycle, we have introduced student-led focus groups for each division, influenced by sparqs work with Gray’s School of Art. These focus groups have included a standard set of questions across all the Divisions about the student experience of curriculum reform and the new curricula and a specific set of questions relating to areas which each Division wished to explore more based on sources of evidence such as internal and external student survey results, class rep feedback or informal student feedback.

The entire taught credit-bearing portfolio will be reviewed over the period of January-April 2018 comprising 13 reviews (12 Divisions plus Teaching and Learning Enhancement)<sup>2</sup>. Following this, a holistic review of the ILR process will be conducted in late spring/early summer 2018. This will include identifying points which need addressing from a central University perspective from the individual panel reports and feeding these into the planning and performance management work detailed in section 2.1. Good practice will also be identified from the ILR documentation and plans are in place for its dissemination through case studies, seminars, workshops and mentoring. Subsequent to 2017/18, the University will resume a rolling schedule of reviews on a six-yearly cycle which will include review of Student Services and Postgraduate Research provision.

During 2016/17 review activities continued with an ILR of our Postgraduate Research provision, this also served to evaluate the success of the Graduate School which was created in 2014 as a response to an area of development highlighted in the reports from our 2012 ELIR. The Graduate School supports Postgraduate Research (PGR) students by creating a community of practice and fostering a cross-institutional, enquiry-driven ethos to facilitate more engagement between PGR students and their supervisors.

The Graduate School ILR report commended the fostering of cross-disciplinary research afforded by the Graduate School and also noted the positive feedback from staff and students, particularly the opportunities for networking and skills development training. Recommendations included considering the development of a traditional MRes degree and reviewing current practice re research students contributing to teaching as not all who wish to teach are given the opportunity to. The Abertay University Research and Knowledge Exchange strategy R-LINCS (Research-Led Innovation Nodes for Contemporary Society) was also reviewed in 2017, and we are awaiting the final report.

Annual monitoring is conducted through programme reports which are considered at School level and fed into School Teaching and Learning Annual Reports. All programmes are mapped to a Division which provides the linkage with ILR.

### 2.3 Recording and reporting of institutional decisions

The ELIR Outcome Report stated that the University should make sure that reporting within centrally produced documentation was tightened to ensure accuracy and clarity and with sufficient detail to ensure institutional oversight would be effective.

As part of the response to this area, each meeting agenda is reviewed to ensure that each paper considered by a committee has a clear purpose, and is appropriate to the purpose of the committee or working group. Following each committee meeting, there are established mechanisms to ensure that the minutes present details on actions agreed to ensure that these are clear and transparent.

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<sup>2</sup> A thirteenth Division came into being in August 2017, however, provision will be reviewed under the twelve division structure which was in place when the scoping work was conducted.

On the back of curriculum reform and the ensuing changes, new forms have been introduced to support module and programme changes, together with a new advisory group (the Quality Management Steering Group - QMSG). QMSG comprises of the Registrar, Director of Teaching and Learning Enhancement, Academic Quality Manager and the four School Academic Curriculum Managers. QMSG reports to the University Teaching and Learning Committee and has a formative purpose in ensuring that changes are clearly articulated, the impact on other programmes is discussed and that changes follow the principles of curriculum reform. As part of this, QMSG has been overseeing and developing the processes for managing quality and reviewing programme and module changes to ensure that a more holistic view is taken. This group has also taken a lead in developing the ILR process for 2017/18 (see section 2.2). The first success for this group has been the approval of programme and module changes for 2017/18 several weeks ahead of previous years, which allowed for module registration to be opened to students some weeks earlier. It has also enabled cross-school issues to be addressed at an early stage.

Other work put in place to address this area for development has focussed on improving processes for module and programme changes; developing a statement of purpose and principles to guide the implementation of annual monitoring and review; agreeing the evidence base for annual reports; reviewing the annual reporting process and mapping to the proposed ILR arrangements.

#### 2.4 Communication with students

The ELIR Outcome Report recommended that the University should review its communication with students to ensure that “*formal information relating to policy and regulatory matters is visible to the student population.*” Abertay was also encouraged to continue with its aim of making external examiner reports and institutional responses more visible to the students.

The work, is still ongoing, however, the University engaged in a project to identify the key messages that need to be effectively communicated to students and map the existing arrangements / tools for communicating key messages to students, these tools were evaluated and the use of alternative tools was considered. Barriers to effective communication were subsequently identified. As a result of this work, the University introduced a new internal Student Dashboard called MyAbertay. This Dashboard is integrated with the VLE and a wide range of other sources of information and can be personalised by students. External Examiner reports, and Schools’ responses to these, are now published routinely on MyAbertay, in the same area as other programme information, and will be discussed at each Division’s Student Voice Forum.

Regulations and policies are all available on MyAbertay, and formal communications about changes in policy will be posted there, as well as being sent to students individually, where appropriate. The intention is that MyAbertay is the place where students should go to find all the information they need. The impact of this new approach will be evaluated through surveys and focus groups.

In addition to an open door policy for communication between the Executive Group of the University and the elected officers of the Students' Association – aided by close proximity of the respective offices on campus – a range of actions have been taken including increasing the number of students on the Teaching & Learning Committee of the University; regular attendance at the Students' Representative Council by senior officers of the University; increased use of posters and infographics to communicate key messages to students (for example to promote the importance of student attendance); and work is underway to develop a new Student Engagement Charter for session 2017/18.

Programme committees are also being replaced with more inclusive Division-led student voice fora to take place in week 7 of each term starting in 2017/18. Oversight of these new fora will be led by TLE with administrative support from Academic Registry. These will be co-chaired by the School Academic Curriculum Manager and a nominated class representative for each Division with meeting agendas being jointly set. All students from the Division will be invited to attend and Heads of Division, Programme Leaders and Module Leaders are required to attend. These fora will allow all students to have an active engagement in discussions re issues and concerns and work collaboratively with staff to discuss possible solutions. These new fora will be reviewed as part of annual monitoring.

## 2.5 Feedback week

The ELIR Outcome Report stated that the University should “*reflect on the purpose and focus of feedback week as part of the revised curriculum*”. The report encouraged a disciplinary focus, working in partnership with students to reflect differing pedagogies and the students' stage of study.

A working group was established and included senior academic staff and student representatives. The group conducted a review of mid-term Feedback Week (week 7). Amongst the evidence considered by the group was a student-initiated project (funded through the Abertay Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund - ATLEF) to evaluate week 7 and make recommendations to the University as to how this initiative could be approved. The work conducted by these students has since been presented at conferences, including the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Enhancement in Higher Education Conference held in Glasgow in June 2017. This highlights the partnership approach adopted at Abertay in evaluating changes as well evidencing the support given to students who wish to take a leading role in evaluating University policy and practice.

This review led to a report being considered by the Teaching & Learning Committee in March 2017. The report made a number of recommendations, including: week 7 continuing to have an emphasis on formative learning, development and engagement, however, Divisions having the flexibility to develop week 7 activities as befits the discipline; using week 7 to strengthen students' engagement with the Abertay Attributes; to consider focusing Term 1, week 7 activities on academic development and Term 2, week 7 activities on personal development; and using week 7 to develop formative engagement with the HEAR, particularly through the evolution of student-led initiatives. A further recommendation was to develop a set of

guiding principles to aid module/programme leaders design week 7 activities and to revise the assessment policy in light of the new approach to week 7.

The Committee welcomed the report and accepted the recommendations, which would allow a more flexible approach to Feedback Week to be adopted. Associated with the approved changes some changes to the Academic Calendar were made and approved by Senate. Guidance was issued to staff in late spring 2017 with a clear statement re the purpose and principles of week 7 incorporating the working group recommendations as outlined above. The revised week 7 guidelines will be in effect for the 2017/18 academic year and the changes will be evaluated through annual monitoring processes and the end of term module surveys.

## 2.6 Other developmental related matters identified in the Technical Report

The University identified a number of additional matters that the ELIR review team drew attention to in their report and has incorporated these into the overarching action plan discussed in section 1. Where applicable, these matters have been included in the more detailed action plans for each of the areas above where applicable. For example, paragraph 100 of the Technical Report on how students should learn about the Academic Regulations is being addressed through the '*Communication with Students*' work on the Student Dashboard. Where the matters are not covered by areas for development identified by the ELIR review team, these have been allocated to actors who report back to Teaching and Learning Committee on progress when the overarching action plan is discussed.

One matter identified in paragraph 52 of the Technical Report was the lack of end of module feedback opportunities. An Internal Student Surveys Short Life Working Group was established in November 2016 and reported to the March 2017 Teaching and Learning Committee. The Working Group recommended that module surveys were conducted in week 11 which is near to the end of the module rather than mid-module as per current practice. Staff are required to produce a short report to their students via the VLE by week 14 which will also be submitted to the first School Academic Committee of the following term for actions to be signed off. Class reps and module leaders will be expected to work together to address concerns raised by students and close the feedback loop of actions on the module through the module noticeboard on the VLE. These recommendations for enhancing end of module feedback were accepted by the Teaching and Learning Committee at its March 2017 meeting and Senate and will be in place for 2017/18.

## **3. Developments in areas of positive practice**

The ELIR Outcome Report identified a number of areas of positive practice which the University has continued to build on over the past year. A few examples of these are given below.

The Outcome Report noted our "open and responsive culture" which "responds to the views of academic staff, professional service staff and students. Abertay's practice in this area has built upon this positive practice and since the ELIR review visit, the University has set up a Staff Engagement Steering Group (SESG) which works on behalf

of the University Executive to ensure that an environment where staff members feel involved, valued and can take pride in their University is created. This group reports to the University staff, Court and other stakeholders. To support the SESG, a broad-based Staff Engagement Advisory Team has also been established which consults colleagues about staff engagement issues and identifies solutions to key issues with actions recommended to SESG. The University is also trialling “open” Teaching and Learning Committee meetings in 2017/18 where along with the core membership, any student or member of staff can attend with full rights and membership. This will be trialled for three meetings in the first instance and then evaluated.

Partnership working with the student body was also identified and there has been continued partnership working with the student body, particularly in the development of the ELIR action plan and the introduction of the Student Charter which aims to aid a strong working relationship between the University and Students’ Association. With the previous Student Partnership Agreement running out in 16/17, the Students’ Association will be working with the University to expand partnership ideas.

This year, there has been strong representation of students at the University Teaching and Learning Committee and in supporting the Institution’s work on the Enhancement Themes, with an increase in the number of students on the University’s Enhancement Themes Steering Group for 2016/17. However, the University and Students’ Association recognise that, working in partnership, more support could be given to students in fulfilling these roles. This is particularly important when controversial topics are discussed to empower the students to feel comfortable in expressing their views which may be contrary to other members of the committee or group.

The positive practice at Abertay in transition support into higher education was also highlighted. Abertay has continued its commitment to supporting transitions into higher education and has taken a full and active part in the current Enhancement Theme on “Student Transitions”. A close working relationship with our college partners is maintained and further collaborative provision is planned which will help HND students in Accounting to access Level 9 provision at Abertay, through joint evening-based teaching.

The positive practice identified in developing students’ Abertay Attributes has been further expanded through Abertay Teaching and Learning Enhancement Funding (ATLEF) being allocated to a project to further develop a student self-evaluation tool to allow students to measure and demonstrate progress towards and achievement of the Abertay Attributes from every aspect of their learning experience. This project will report on the evaluation of this tool at the end of 2017/18.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The University has made good progress in addressing the matters identified by the ELIR Panel for further development and will continue to work through the issues, led by the ELIR Steering Group and reporting to the University’s Teaching & Learning Committee and thence to Senate.

*Further information is available from the University by contacting Professor Steve Olivier, Vice-Principal (Academic): s.olivier@abertay.ac.uk.*

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