

Enhancement-led Institutional Review of University of Edinburgh

Outcome Report

March 2021



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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 Outcome Report of the ELIR conducted by QAA at the University of Edinburgh. The review took place as follows: Planning Visit on 3 February 2021 and Review Visit on 22-26 March 2021. The review was conducted by a team of six reviewers:

- Mr Matthew Adie (Student Reviewer)
- Professor Ian Dunn (Academic Reviewer)
- Ms Emma Hardy (Student Reviewer)
- Professor Clare Peddie (Academic Reviewer)
- Professor Jonathan Scott (Academic Reviewer)
- Mr Peter Watson (Coordinating Reviewer).

This report sets out the threshold 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.

The threshold judgement for this report can be found on page 3, followed by commendations and recommendations.

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

The impact of COVID-19

The ELIR was originally scheduled to take place during autumn 2020. This was after the start of the national lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in the ELIR cycle being delayed and a number of ELIRs from spring 2020 being rescheduled to autumn. In discussion with the University of Edinburgh and the Scottish Funding Council, the University of Edinburgh ELIR was rescheduled to February and March 2021 as detailed above. 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

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

⁴ Technical Report: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/University-of-Edinburgh

the institution's approach to quality and standards from the time of the last ELIR in 2015. 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 University of Edinburgh

The University of Edinburgh was founded in 1583 and is one of Scotland's four ancient universities. The University describes itself as a large and diverse research-intensive university. The University occupies an estate of more than 250 buildings organised in five main campuses spread across Edinburgh. The breadth of study offered at the University of Edinburgh is the third most comprehensive in the UK and the most comprehensive in Scotland.

The current Principal and Vice-Chancellor assumed their roles in February 2018 and a new strategic focus has been established. The University's strategic plan - 'Strategy 2030' launched in September 2019, established a values-led approach to teaching, research and innovation to provide a focus for the multiple strands and plans emerging from Strategy 2030. The University has seven core values relating to excellence, ambition, community, internationalism, locality and transformation.

Edinburgh's academic structure is based on three colleges, each led by a Vice-Principal: the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Science (25,815 students in 2019-20); the College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine (7,250 students in 2019-20); and the College of Science and Engineering (11,445 students in 2019-20). Colleges are in turn arranged in 20 schools, three deaneries (in the Edinburgh Medical School) and one centre (for Open Learning). The University has collaborative agreements leading to a joint University of Edinburgh qualification with 55 international institutions and seven UK institutions. The University has recently established a new interdisciplinary centre - the Edinburgh Futures Institute - with a focus on external collaboration and new ways of working and learning. A Doctoral College was established in January 2020 to coordinate and enhance postgraduate research student activities and experience across the University.

Threshold judgement about University of Edinburgh

The University of Edinburgh 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.

Commendations

- 1 The University is commended for the following areas of good practice.
- 2 **Student partnership** - the University's commitment to working in close partnership with the student body is exemplified by student involvement across all decision-making structures and university initiatives. Student membership on both the University Executive and the Adaptation and Renewal Team is particularly positive and has resulted in demonstrable student contribution at a strategic level.
- 3 **Institute for Academic Development (IAD)** - provides responsive, reflective and proactive university-level support for teaching, learning and researcher development and is valued by staff and students. The Institute for Academic Development provides significant opportunities for supporting and sharing best practice and the University is encouraged to consider how to further develop the department's reach across the institution.
- 4 **Peer Assisted Learning Schemes (PALS)** - the promotion and expansion of the student association-led and university-supported PALS have contributed to the integration of students as they join the University. These schemes effectively deploy students who have first-hand experience of transitions.
- 5 **Support for student involvement in Internal Periodic Review (IPR)** - the University operates a highly-professionalised approach to supporting the recruitment, selection and training of students to effectively contribute to the University's IPR process. This centrally-delivered training is recognised by both staff and students as being key in enabling students to contribute meaningfully to the University's institution-led review process.

Recommendations

- 6 The University is asked to consider the following recommendations.
- 7 **Oversight and implementation of policy and practice** - recognising the decentralised nature of university structures, the institution should establish a systematic approach to enable effective institutional oversight and evaluation of the implementation of policy and practice. As part of this, the University is asked to increase the range and use of institutionally determined baseline requirements to ensure consistency and accountability. The institution should ensure that mechanisms are put in place to adequately evaluate the consistency of implementation of strategic objectives across the institution and act when Schools deviate from institutional expectations.

- 8 **Pace of change** - develop an effective approach to the strategic leadership and management of change that will ensure more immediate and timely implementation of identified solutions in order to support staff and enhance the student experience.
- 9 **Personal tutor scheme** - make significant progress in implementing plans to ensure an effective approach to offering personal student support. In doing so, and recognising the extended period of time that the University has been developing its approach to personal tutoring, it is asked to reflect on whether the current timescale for implementation of the institutional Student Support and Personal Tutor Plan in 2023-24, is sufficiently ambitious. The University should make demonstrable progress within the next academic year in respect of ensuring parity of experience for students and effective signposting to support services and delivery of an agreed and consistent baseline level of provision. As part of its approach, the University is asked to develop an effective mechanism to monitor consistency of implementation and allow it to evaluate the impact of these changes on the student experience.
- 10 **Assessment and feedback** - over an extended period of time, the University has considered a broad evidence-base which has highlighted concerns about assessment and feedback and this remains an area of challenge for the institution. The University is asked to make demonstrable progress, within the next academic year, in prioritising the development of a holistic and strategic approach to the design and management of assessment and feedback. The University should also progress with proposals for the establishment of a common marking scheme to ensure comparability of student assessment processes across Schools.
- 11 **Strategic approach to the enhancement of learning and teaching** - in view of the current transition between the Learning and Teaching Strategy 2017 and future plans, the University should provide institutional oversight, and ensure clarity for staff, on the strategic direction underpinning current learning and teaching developments.
- 12 **Oversight and planning for growth of student numbers** - implement an approach to facilitate institutional oversight and the effective planning and monitoring of student numbers, in order to ensure that appropriate and timely actions can be taken where increases in student numbers impact on arrangements for learning and teaching and student support.
- 13 **Attainment gap monitoring** - consider how to address attainment gaps in student performance through the oversight, coordination and monitoring at an institutional level of school-level actions.
- 14 **Training for postgraduate research (PGR) students who teach** - ensure effective implementation of its policy for the training and support of postgraduates who teach and ensure all PGR students are trained before engaging in teaching activities.
- 15 **Recognition and support for academic staff development** - take action to remove barriers which exist that prevent some academic staff from fully engaging with its existing suite of development opportunities for the professionalisation of teaching.
- 16 **Promotion of academic staff based on teaching** - progress with work to improve the recognition of teaching excellence across all aspects of the University. In particular, the University should ensure that recognition for teaching is embedded in annual review processes, that clarity of roles and titles is established, and that a clear progression pathway providing parity of recognition for education-focused academics is developed. In addition, the institution should ensure that it has the data available to be able to evidence and evaluate the progress made in all of these areas.

What happens next?

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

18 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. The final version of the institution's Follow-up Report is published on the QAA website. Institutions also engage in a range of enhancement and development activities including Focus On projects where institutions work collaboratively to improve policy and practice relating to topics that are frequently occurring in ELIR outcomes.

Further information

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

20 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](#).

21 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](#).

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

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

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