Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education’s (QAA’s) mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. To do this, QAA carries out institutional reviews of higher education institutions. In Scotland, this process is known as Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR). QAA operates equivalent but separate processes in England, Northern Ireland and Wales.

The enhancement-led approach

ELIR is one element of the Quality Enhancement Framework which was developed and is implemented on a partnership basis in Scotland with the Scottish Funding Council, Universities Scotland and representatives of the student body. The five elements of the Framework are:

- a comprehensive programme of review at the subject level, managed by the institutions, known as institution-led quality review
- an agreed set of public information about quality
- a greater voice for students in institutional quality systems, supported by a national development service (known as student participation in quality scotland, sparqs)
- a national programme of Enhancement Themes aimed at developing and sharing good practice in learning and teaching
- a programme of Enhancement-led Institutional Review involving all Scottish higher education institutions being reviewed over a four-year period.

Conclusions and judgement within ELIR

ELIR is an evidence-based method of peer review. Each ELIR team makes a judgement about the institution’s management of academic standards and of the assurance and enhancement of the student learning experience. This judgement is expressed in the form of the level of confidence that can be placed in the institution’s current and likely future management of these activities. Each ELIR team also provides a commentary on:

i the effectiveness of the institution’s management of the student learning experience

ii the effectiveness of the institution’s arrangements for institution-led monitoring and review of quality and academic standards of awards, however and wherever delivered

iii the effectiveness of the institution’s implementation of its strategic approach to quality enhancement.

ELIR reports

From 2008-09, full and summary ELIR reports are produced and made available on the QAA website at www.qaa.ac.uk. The summary reports are aimed at an informed lay audience and are intended to promote wider engagement with ELIR outcomes.
Enhancement-led Institutional Review

University of Edinburgh

Introduction

1 This is the summary report of an Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) of the University of Edinburgh (the University) undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). This summary is intended to promote the accessibility of the ELIR outcomes among a wider audience. The formal outcomes of ELIR are detailed within the full report which is produced in electronic format and is available on the QAA website at www.qaa.ac.uk.

ELIR method

2 The ELIR method was revised during 2007-08 following extensive consultation with the Scottish higher education sector, including engagement with student representative bodies, the Scottish Funding Council, and the institutions themselves. Full detail on the method, which is intended to operate between 2008-09 and 2011-12, is set out in the Enhancement-led institutional review handbook: Scotland (second edition, 2008) which is available on the QAA website.

3 The ELIR method focuses on three main areas: the management of the student learning experience; institution-led quality monitoring and review; and the strategic management of quality enhancement. Each ELIR begins with the institution’s submission of a self-evaluative document (the Reflective Analysis) which provides the focus for the review. ELIR reports include an overarching judgement on the level of confidence which can be placed in the institution’s management of academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience.

ELIR team and visits

4 In line with the review method, the ELIR team visited the University on two occasions: the Part 1 visit took place on 12 and 13 October 2011 and the Part 2 visit took place in the week beginning 28 November 2011. The team comprised a group of peers: a student reviewer from a Scottish university; three senior academic reviewers drawn from across the UK; a senior academic international reviewer; and a coordinating reviewer with senior administrative experience from an English university. The review was managed by an Assistant Director from QAA Scotland.

Background information about the institution

5 The University of Edinburgh is one of Scotland’s ancient universities and has the largest student population of the Scottish universities with just under 29,000 students (by headcount) in 2010-11. Following the merger with Edinburgh College of Art (in August 2011), the University estimated that its student population has risen to almost 30,000. The University describes itself as a large and diverse research-intensive university with a clear commitment to excellence in learning and teaching. The University also describes itself as distinctly Scottish but with a reach and aspirations that are global. Around 30 per cent of the total student population comes from over 120 countries outside the UK. The University has an explicit strategic intention to increase its proportion of international students and to increase the number of postgraduate students, both taught and research. In particular, the University’s Distance Education Initiative is aimed at increasing taught postgraduate student numbers, focusing initially on new programmes and courses to be delivered online and at a distance.

6 The University highlights that it offers the most comprehensive range of subjects in Scotland (and the third most comprehensive in the UK). Following the merger with Edinburgh College of Art, the University’s students study across 103 of the 144 principal subjects defined by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Students are taught in 22 schools across three colleges: the College of Humanities and Social Science; the College of Science and Engineering;
and the College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine. The University has a small number of collaborative programmes; the most significant collaborative partner being the Scottish Agricultural College.

**Outcomes of the review**

7 ELIR reports highlight areas of good practice and identify areas in which institutions should take action; in many cases the actions have been identified by institutions during their preparations for ELIR. Key outcomes from the University’s ELIR report are set out here.

8 The University has systematic processes in place to secure academic standards and assure the quality of the student experience.

**Areas of positive practice**

9 The full report highlights good practice at the University in a range of areas.

10 Student partnership - there is clear evidence of an extensive and effective partnership with the Edinburgh University Students’ Association (EUSA), especially at the strategic level. Student engagement is valued by staff and students, and there is evidence of action being taken as a result. The University is working with EUSA to continue enhancing the arrangements for student representation, particularly at the college level.

11 Research-teaching linkages - students are positive about the learning experience provided by the University, in particular the emphasis placed on research-led teaching. Students are enthusiastic about the content of the curriculum and the learning and teaching approach, which includes a focus on research methodologies and opportunities to engage in research projects.

12 Learning environment - there is careful planning and management of the learning resources required to support the research-led curriculum. The approach to designing and managing the University’s learning spaces has been informed by national and international practice, and by staff and student views.

13 Quality monitoring and review - there have been a number of amendments to the University’s processes, committee structures and senior roles since the last ELIR which have improved the effectiveness of review and monitoring activity, and which meet sector expectations. In particular, recent revisions to the committee structure have improved the institutional oversight of the outcomes from monitoring and review. The quality processes are supported by the creation of helpful and comprehensive guidance, briefing notes and templates which are readily accessible to all participants via the University website.

14 Availability of public information - the University is committed to making a wide range of information accessible to the public through its website, and there have been positive developments since the 2006 ELIR to promote the currency and reliability of that information.

15 Strategic focus on quality enhancement - the restructuring of the Senate committees and related quality remits has led to a clearer strategic focus on enhancement, with enhancement becoming more embedded in a variety of activities across the institution.

16 Sector-leading enhancement - in a number of areas, for example feedback on assessment and research-teaching linkages, the University’s enhancement activities represent sector-leading good practice, although there can be variable implementation across the institution. Of particular note is the University’s proactive approach to learning from national and international practice to inform initiatives within the institution, such as the redevelopment of the Main Library.

17 National Enhancement Themes - the University has been a significant contributor to the national programme of Enhancement Themes, and there is considerable evidence of the University using the outcomes of the national Themes to inform its own policies and practice.
Institute for Academic Development - although recently established, it is already clear that the Institute for Academic Development is an effective driver for promoting an enhancement culture. The opportunity for staff to undertake secondments to the Institute is a particularly positive development, promoting the exploration and exchange of good practice.

**Areas for development**

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

20 Changing student population - in the context of the intended increase in international and distance learning student numbers, adopt a more strategic and planned approach to anticipating the changes that are likely to be required to the curriculum and to the academic environment. In doing this, the University will be able to draw on examples of good practice that are already taking place within the institution, such as in the Global Academies.

21 Variability between schools - ensure greater equity and consistency in a number of key areas of activity within and between schools. Areas include the identification of and reporting on student views; the provision of feedback to students on their assessed work; training of new staff, tutors and demonstrators; staff appraisal; and academic and personal support. In some cases, the University has clear expectations but needs to put effective mechanisms in place for ensuring these expectations are met in all schools.

22 Student guidance and support - prioritise the implementation of the recently agreed framework for enhancing academic and pastoral support.

23 Responding and reporting on monitoring and review - consider introducing greater consistency in the ways in which information is gathered and reported at the course level as a means of helping to identify trends across the institution. The University is encouraged to pursue its intention to introduce closer monitoring and more timely reporting on the outcomes of its periodic review methods within the committee structure. The University is asked to ensure that it takes substantive action to address all of the outcomes of the current ELIR in a timely manner.

24 Learning and teaching enhancement strategies - review the status and function of school-level learning and teaching enhancement strategies. The University is also encouraged to ensure the institutional and college strategies will be reviewed in the same cycle.

**Overarching confidence judgement**

25 The overarching judgement is set out in the full report as follows:

The findings of the ELIR indicate that there can be confidence in the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of the student learning experience it provides.

26 This is a positive judgement, indicating that the University has secure arrangements for managing academic standards and for assuring and enhancing the quality of the student experience.

**Follow-up to the review**

27 In the ELIR method, institutions are asked to provide a formal, written response to the review one year after publication of their ELIR report. Institutions' responses are also discussed during annual meetings with senior staff from QAA Scotland. The final version of the institution's response is published on the QAA website.