



Quality Enhancement and Standards Review

University of Edinburgh

Review Report
November 2023

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Introduction

This is a report of a review under the [Quality Enhancement and Standards Review](#) (QESR) method conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) as part of Phase 1 of the Scottish Quality Enhancement arrangements at the University of Edinburgh.

The review took place on 16 November 2023 and was conducted by a review team, as follows:

- Janet Allison (Coordinating Reviewer)
- Amy Gallacher (Student Reviewer)
- Professor Jonathan Scott (Academic Reviewer).

QESR is Phase 1 of a two-phase approach that enables the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to fulfil its statutory obligation under Section 13 of the *Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005* to ensure that provision is made for assessing and enhancing the quality of fundable higher education provided by fundable bodies for academic quality and enhancement between 2022-24. The second phase of QAA's external quality review arrangements starts in 2024-25 to coincide with the implementation of new tertiary quality arrangements.

The main purpose of this review was to:

- provide assurance about the provider's management of its responsibilities for academic standards to inform an enhancement-led full institutional review in Phase 2
- provide assurance about the provider's management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities for students to inform an enhancement-led full review in Phase 2
- report on any features of good practice
- make recommendations for action.

About the 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 550 buildings organised in five main campuses spread across Edinburgh. The University's academic structure is based on three colleges, each led by a Vice-Principal: the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (28,570 students in 2022-23); the College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine (8,410 students in 2022-23); and the College of Science and Engineering (12,760 students in 2022-23) which are in turn arranged in 21 schools.

In 2022-23, the University had a total student population (headcount) of 49,740 of whom: 29,765 were undergraduate; 13,550 were postgraduate taught (PGT); and 6,425 were postgraduate research (PGR). Of the 2022-23 student population, 13,290 were studying part-time.

Findings

From the evidence presented, the review team is confident that the University of Edinburgh is making effective progress in continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision to enable effective arrangements to be in place for managing academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience.

Good practice

The QESR team found the following **features of good practice**.

- **School networks in support of learning and teaching development:** The work of the Institute for Academic Development in establishing a network of secondees and associates embedded within the schools to support developments in learning and teaching (paragraph 7).

Recommendations for action

In 2021, the University of Edinburgh received 10 recommendations from Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR 4). The QESR team acknowledged the University's progress on four of those recommendations. However, for the remainder, the QESR team considers further progress and more timely action must be undertaken to fulfil the recommendations. The University should prioritise action on the following [recommendations from ELIR 4](#) so that the impact of the action being undertaken is completed effectively, impacts positively on the student learning experience and is being implemented consistently across schools. In addition, the QESR team makes the following **recommendations for action** based on, and in addition to, the ELIR 4 recommendations:

- **Pace of change:** The University should make progress on and accelerate its actions in response to the recommendations from the previous ELIR, ensuring effective and consistent implementation by all schools, and monitor the outcomes, in order to evidence significant progress within the next academic year (paragraph 20).
- **Learning and Teaching Strategy:** The University should expedite the final drafting, approval and implementation of the Learning and Teaching Strategy to help staff and students understand how major strategic projects work together and provide clarity on the strategic approach to enhancing learning and teaching (paragraph 19).
- **Assessment and feedback:** The University should take immediate action, within the current academic year, to ensure that the new Assessment and Feedback Principles and Priorities (developed in response to ELIR 4) are fully implemented in all schools, that feedback turnaround times and quality are monitored effectively, and that prompt action is taken to address any shortcomings (paragraphs 23-25).
- **Training for postgraduate research (PGR) students who teach:** The University should take prompt action, within the current academic year, to consistently implement its updated policy and to ensure that training for PGRs who teach is required at the university and school-level, and that this action is monitored on an ongoing basis to ensure that all PGRs are fully supported in undertaking their teaching duties (paragraph 21).
- **Promotion of academic staff based on teaching:** The University should clearly and accurately record data on promotion routes based on teaching excellence so it can effectively evidence the implementation of its goal to achieve parity between teaching and research, and take action to ensure this aim is met (paragraph 26).

- **Attainment gap monitoring:** The University should pay particular attention to sharing good practice and supporting staff in understanding the causes of attainment gaps and taking effective action (paragraph 27).

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

Strategic approach to enhancement

1 The QESR team is confident that the University has effective arrangements in place to monitor, review and enhance its strategic approach to enhancement. The team considered a range of documents, including: the University's Strategy 2030; the report to the Scottish Funding Council; the Outcome Agreement; the proposals and associated action plans in relation to development of the Learning and Teaching Strategy; the mapping of learning and teaching to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code); and the minutes of the Senate Quality Assurance Committee and the Senate Education Committee (SEC). The team also met with staff and students.

2 The University's Strategy 2030 sets out four areas of focus for the University. In the area of learning and teaching, the overarching objectives are that teaching will match the excellence of the research and that there will be sustained improvements in student satisfaction and wellbeing. The University has set out its current strategic approach to enhancement which is linked to four main projects: the Curriculum Transformation Programme (CTP); the new Student Support Model; Assessment and Feedback Principles and Priorities; and the Continuous Service Improvement Programme. At present, the University recognises that, while each project has a set of action plans, there is not a high-level action plan providing coordinating oversight of all the projects: it is planned that this should form part of the Learning and Teaching Strategy when this is formulated. Oversight of the projects is currently maintained by reporting lines to Court, the University Executive, and the Senate. The University has also recently approved the establishment of a University Initiative Portfolio Board which will provide oversight of strategic projects and the development of new initiatives along with managing prioritisation.

3 The CTP is planned to run until academic year (AY) 2025-26, setting out a 'vision of an outstanding educational experience for students'. As such, it is seen as underpinning the current strategic direction in learning and teaching with progress being reported on to SEC as a standing agenda item, as well as update reports to the University Executive. Key features of the CTP include the development of Challenge Courses and Experiential Learning as well as improving teaching efficiency and more effective use of the physical and digital estate. The QESR team was informed by senior staff that the University has engaged with academic champions in the schools to help identify the core elements of CTP and to strengthen communications. However, in meetings with the team, some staff and students observed that they were unclear about the direction and timescale for the project.

4 Progress with the new Student Support Model is reported by the University in its self-evaluation for QESR as being excellent, with initial implementation taking place in AY 2022-23 and full roll-out in AY 2023-24. The overview report indicated that the new model was well received by staff and students with the provision of more effective and consistent levels of student support. This perspective was also confirmed by staff who met with the team, although some students observed that there was confusion over the channels of communication and role responsibilities of key staff, resulting in lack of clarity for some students.

5 The Continuous Service Improvement Programme (CSIP) is monitored by the Student Lifecycle Management Group, with reporting to the University Executive. The CSIP incorporates several projects intended to improve the student journey. Task and finish groups have been established 'with a view to implementing initial small changes for AY 2023-24'. These include large-scale projects such as timetabling, which are seen as a priority and are ongoing, as well as improved planning for course enrolments; review of the schemes for fees, bursaries and scholarships; improved induction and enhanced creation of

a sense of belonging; improvements in the capture and use of student feedback and an enhanced communications strategy. Outcomes of the CSIP have included guidance on the recognition, reward and remuneration for students who support the work of the University.

6 The University's plans to enhance the student learning experience are also articulated in the Digital Strategy which is linked to its engagement with the sector-wide enhancement topic (paragraphs 28-29), and underpinned through the objectives of the Curriculum Transformation Programme and the pre-existing work undertaken by the Edinburgh Futures Institute. This is also supported through the work of the Institute for Academic Development (IAD) which offers a range of focused workshops on developing digital teaching practices and the opportunity to engage in a peer observation of teaching (POT scheme), specifically focused on digital teaching practices. The University has also committed significant resource to prioritise major investments totalling over £2 million to enhance the digital estate.

7 The IAD has developed an ongoing provision of staff development activities in support of learning and teaching. These have included an annual learning and teaching conference, staff engagement with the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice and recognition of fellowships at all four levels of the Professional Standards Framework. The IAD also delivered a wide range of workshops for staff covering different topics to support enhancement of academic practice. The IAD also hosts a number of staff on secondment each year, enabling them to focus time on specific enhancement projects. Former secondees remain engaged with the IAD as associates who form a network linking the IAD with their academic schools as well as being active contributors to the University's Teaching Matters blog. The embedding of the current and former secondees within the schools has helped disseminate good practice and drive developments in learning and teaching. The QESR team consider that the work of the Institute for Academic Development in establishing a network of secondees and associates embedded within the schools to support pedagogic developments, is a feature of **good practice**.

Student partnership

8 The QESR team is confident that the University has effective arrangements in place to monitor, review and enhance its approach to student partnership. The team considered the Student Partnership Agreement (SPA); Outcome Agreement to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) 2022-23; Annual report to the SFC on Institution-led Review and Enhancement Activity 2022-23; UK Quality Code Mapping; Internal Periodic Review (IPR) Handbook and Guidance; relevant institutional committee minutes considering student survey feedback; and met with staff and students.

9 The overarching framework for student engagement is set out in the University's revised Student Voice Policy (SVP), which outlines the role and responsibilities of students, staff and university-level committees to ensure that partnership arrangements meet sector expectations. This is supported by extensive mapping to the Quality Code which provides an overview of student engagement activities at course, programme and institutional-levels. At school and college-level, students are given the opportunity to provide feedback through locally managed course evaluation, programme representatives, student-staff liaison committees and engagement with IPR in review meetings and as panel members; which is then used by staff to support reflection during annual monitoring self-evaluation activities. Opportunities for students to provide institution-level feedback are provided through Edinburgh University Students' Association (EUSA) student officers, university-wide student surveys (NSS, PTES, PRES, pulse surveys) and student panels and focus groups; with feedback then being used to inform institutional planning and development of strategic initiatives.

10 The University's commitment to working in partnership with students is outlined

through its Student Partnership Agreement (SPA) - which is updated annually - and identifies shared priority areas between the University and the EUSA, reflecting key challenges affecting the student experience. As each of the SPA themes is intended to recognise existing areas of partnership, work in relation to the SPA is progressed through university-level project or task groups, as well as through new initiatives. In particular, the Curriculum Transformation Programme (CTP) and Continuous Service Improvement Programme (CSIP), both of which are feeding into the development of the new Learning and Teaching Strategy, were highlighted as examples of where ongoing work addresses SPA themes.

11 The University is taking action to address 2023 NSS scores around Student Voice that indicate that 82.27% of students are satisfied with the opportunities available to provide feedback on their course but only 46.16% agree that they know how their feedback is acted upon. This is also reflected in IPR report recommendations from AY 2022-23 which highlight the need to close the feedback loop with students. As part of the SVP, schools have transitioned from using centrally-managed Course Enhancement Questionnaires (CEQ) to locally-managed course evaluation. This change is intended to facilitate closer student-staff interaction at a local level, with school staff responsible for monitoring and evaluating their approach to student voice activities. Progress reports on university-level actions arising from thematic analysis of Annual Quality Reports state that a toolkit has been developed to help support school staff and that monitoring of school-level approaches would continue to ensure effectiveness of the various approaches adopted and enable the sharing of best practice. Students highlighted examples of where course leaders have already taken steps to strengthen communication channels, including use of personalised emails updating cohorts on any actions taken in response to feedback provided.

12 Student representatives that met with the QESR team recognised the closing of the feedback loop as an issue, explaining that they often encounter the same feedback at both school and institutional-levels, and that when feedback is provided, they 'hope' it is acted upon. Student representatives explained that receiving blanket 'nothing can be done' responses from staff was particularly frustrating and demoralising. Staff confirmed that they had experience of receiving feedback that could not be resolved at school-level; however, they highlighted that some Colleges had established Student-Staff Liaison Committees to ensure that feedback can progress through appropriate channels. The QESR team heard that the University is exploring training for staff on how to respond to student feedback when it cannot be actioned; recognising that when action is taken in response to student feedback, either at course-level or when it informs the development of a strand of a strategic initiative, the timescales may prohibit student awareness of the impact of their contribution. Senior staff reported an increasing trend towards use of 'mid-course feedback collection' by schools as it allows action to be taken within the semester and increases opportunities to close the feedback loop with students.

13 Despite the reported NSS student satisfaction with feedback opportunities, reporting to the SFC identifies that schools and deaneries have experienced 'persistently low levels of student engagement with centrally and locally managed feedback initiatives', which has frustrated staff due to the impact on the utility of any feedback acquired. Staff explained while they have run focus groups to understand why students have not engaged with feedback opportunities, focused on building constructive relationships with student representatives and have trialled different feedback gathering initiatives which recognise and reflect 'what matters to students', engaging students continues to be extremely difficult. Examples of where staff have taken action to improve partnership working arrangements with student representatives is recorded in the SFC report, which provides specific examples of where collaboration has resulted in the design of course evaluation methods, creation of additional in-house surveys, and development of supporting guidance for student representatives.

14 Senior staff recognised both closing the feedback loop and low levels of student engagement as ongoing challenges for the University, and confirmed they are working closely with EUSA, student representatives and the wider student body using student panels, pulse surveys and focus groups to enhance institutional understanding of both issues. The QESR heard that while the Student Lifecycle Management Group continues to identify and disseminate best practice from monitoring of school-level approaches, it was felt that the increased flexibility of the new model had undermined clarity on expectations underpinning student engagement and has meant that continuous improvement to student engagement activities is not currently 'self-fulfilling'. The University should continue to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the new arrangements to assure itself that the SVP vision of student-staff owned, strategically-led student engagement is fully realised.

Action taken since ELIR 4

15 In 2021, the University of Edinburgh received 10 recommendations from Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR 4). The QESR team concludes that the University has made sufficient progress on four of those recommendations but further action is required on the remaining recommendations from ELIR 4. In coming to this conclusion, the team considered the ELIR 4 action plan progress update, the ELIR follow-up report, the annual reports to the Scottish Funding Council, the minutes of the Senate Quality Assurance Committee (SQAC), the Senate Academic Policy and Regulations Committee and the ELIR Oversight Group. The team also met with staff and students.

16 ELIR 4 (2021) identified 10 areas for development. The University was asked to make significant progress, within the following academic year on two of those recommendations (assessment and feedback, and the personal tutor scheme). The University has initiated actions in all areas but there is still further work to be done to progress a number of these where the impact of the action being undertaken is not yet complete, fully impacting positively on the student learning experience or being implemented consistently across schools. In aiming to address the recommendations, the University has established several working groups with reporting lines through to the ELIR Oversight Group which, in turn reports to the University Executive.

17 The ELIR 4 team recommended that the University increased oversight and planning for growth of student numbers and the QESR team concludes that sufficient progress has been made. In AY 2022-23, the University agreed a set of objectives - for on-campus undergraduate, taught postgraduate, and postgraduate research students, as well as for part-time online master's students - which are linked to the ambitions of the University's Strategy 2030 and underpinned by the Strategic Performance Framework; the initial focus being on the undergraduate and postgraduate taught student populations. The University Executive agreed the Strategic Recruitment Enrolment Plan which incorporates a set of key performance indicators including specific consideration of widening participation and international student recruitment. The planning also includes provision of additional resources to support teaching in previously over-recruited areas.

18 The ELIR 4 team recommended that the University provided institutional oversight and ensured clarity for staff on the strategic approach to the enhancement of learning and teaching, in particular during the transitional period between the previous Learning and Teaching Strategy, which ended in 2019, and the development of a new one. In response, the University has built on key strategic projects, including: the Curriculum Transformation Programme; the Continuous Service Improvement Programme (CSIP) assessment; and feedback, training and support for PGR tutors and academic staff development; some of these being addressed as specific responsive actions set out below. Work is focused on developing approaches to institutional consistency and establishment of methods for monitoring across schools.

19 It was reported that a task group of the Senate Education Committee (SEC) would take forward the work of developing a new Learning and Teaching Strategy in the first half of AY 2022-23. Subsequently SEC, in September 2023, 'discussed a proposal for the development of a Learning and Teaching Strategy', agreeing that 'an initial draft will be developed for further discussion. In a meeting with staff, the QESR team was told that, in the absence of an institutional strategy, schools had developed their own approaches. At the meeting with senior staff, the team was informed that a draft strategy had recently been formulated and undergone an initial review by SEC. The team was provided with a copy of the draft following the QESR visit. Given the delays in developing the Learning and Teaching Strategy and the associated direction for schools, the QESR team **recommends** that the University expedites the final drafting, approval and implementation of the Learning and Teaching Strategy to help staff and students understand how major strategic projects work together and provide clarity on the strategic approach to enhancing learning and teaching.

20 More effective management of the pace of change was recommended by the ELIR 4 team. This was taken on board as a series of recommendations by the Senior Leadership Team in September 2022, intended to take the form of the series of identified strategic change projects which are linked to Strategy 2030, and which provide clarity regarding the intended outcomes. There is recognition that the University still needs to develop effective ways of managing strategic projects and the QESR team was informed that a University Initiatives Portfolio Board has been established to maintain oversight of these projects and manage prioritisation along with an oversight group, chaired by the Provost, with the Heads of Colleges to ensure effective line management of project implementation. The QESR team **recommends** that the University makes progress on and accelerates its actions in response to the recommendations from the previous ELIR - ensuring effective and consistent implementation by all schools - and monitors the outcomes, in order to evidence significant progress within the next academic year.

21 The ELIR 4 team recommended that the University should ensure effective implementation of its policy for the training and support for postgraduate students who teach. At its meeting in March 2023, the ELIR Oversight Group recognised that there was still progress needed to implement the policy for Tutors and Demonstrators, including postgraduate (PGR) students who teach. This issue is being addressed by a Training Working Group, overseen by the Institute for Academic Development, which has resulted in guidance being developed for the implementation of the policy to ensure consistency across schools. The QESR team was informed that the supplementary guidance to support the policy had been approved by Senate Education Committee the week preceding the QESR visit. PGR students who met the QESR team reported that they had engaged with university-level training, though there was some confusion as to whether that training was mandatory. They also observed that programme-specific training was provided within schools, although this appeared variable and dependent on school provision. Likewise, there was variation in the perceived quality of school-level support provided for PGRs. Staff who met the QESR team reported that a PGR network was planned to further support PGRs who teach, but that there was still variability regarding policy implementation and governance within the schools. The team noted that the proposals for PGR training were appropriate but that more work needed to be done to embed them within the schools. The University should prioritise and complete the recommendation on training for PGR students who teach from ELIR 4, expediting progress to ensure that the work being undertaken is effective. In addition, the QESR team **recommends** that the University should take prompt action, within the current academic year, to consistently implement its updated policy and to ensure that training for PGRs who teach is required at university and school-level, and that this action is monitored on an ongoing basis to ensure that all PGRs are fully supported in undertaking their teaching duties.

22 At the time of the 2021 ELIR, the timeline for the implementation of the new Student

Support Model was planned for academic year AY 2023-24. The ELIR team noted that the University had been developing its approach to personal tutoring over an extended time period and recommended that there should be significant progress in implementing its plans, and asked the University to reflect on whether the timescale for implementation (AY 2023-24) was sufficiently ambitious. In response, the University established a new Student Wellbeing Service in September 2022 with an accelerated rollout of the new Student Support Model. Phase 1 was introduced for all new students in AY 2022-23 with Phase 2 being implemented for all students in AY 2023-24. Initial indications are that the system has been well received by staff and students, with greater consistency of support provision. The University reports progress as being 'excellent' and that adoption of the new Student Adviser, Wellbeing Adviser and Academic Cohort Lead roles has already begun to fulfil the strategic initiative aim of ensuring all students have access to appropriate academic guidance and wellbeing support during their studies. This was endorsed by staff who explained that the distinct support roles had provided a more accessible and consistent student support offering. Students that met with the QESR team generally reported optimistically on their experience of the new support arrangements; however, they expressed concern over lack of student awareness regarding which staff held roles in their school, flagging that online students as a group were particularly affected, and that there was the need for clarity on role responsibilities and communication channels between staff when referring students on to other support services. The QESR team recognises that the University is currently developing an evaluation model to provide ongoing quality assurance for the new Student Support Model arrangements; however, the team considers in the interim period that there would be benefit in strengthening communication with students regarding role responsibilities of staff and opportunities for students to provide feedback on the new model.

23 Assessment and feedback was identified as an area for development in both the 2015 and 2021 ELIR reports. The University was therefore asked to make demonstrable progress within the academic year following the 2021 ELIR. As a result, the University's Assessment and Feedback Task Group was established to develop a set of Principles and Priorities. These were approved in May 2022 by the Senate Education Committee alongside the establishment of the Assessment and Feedback Strategy Group and the Assessment and Feedback Guidance, Procedures, Data, Systems and Evaluation Group.

24 Schools have been required to report on their engagement with the Principles and Priorities as part of their annual monitoring procedure with evaluation via quality reports overseen by the Assessment and Feedback Strategy Group. The reports considered by the School Annual Quality Reports Sub-Group indicate variable progress in implementation of the Principles and Priorities. The ELIR 4 Action Plan - Progress Update 2023 states that the progress and impact of these Principles and Priorities have been impacted by the industrial action and the marking and assessment boycott - which is reflected in the National Student Survey (NSS) scores for assessment and feedback - with the largest impact being on feedback turnaround times. The University acknowledges in its annual report to the Scottish Funding Council that there are inconsistencies in meeting feedback return dates, and this was further confirmed during the QESR review meetings. In this context, the QESR team noted that the University was 11.9 percentage points below benchmark for assessment and feedback in the 2023 NSS and that both the quality and timing of feedback were identified as specific issues in the free-text comments. Students also commented on the variable quality of the feedback received. Senior staff recognise that this must be a priority for the University and informed the team that meetings have taken place with College Heads to ensure they monitor turnaround times and report upwards regarding any instances of these not being met. They also informed the team that assessment and feedback will be a focus for programme redesign as part of the Curriculum Transformation Programme.

25 The ELIR 4 recommendation on assessment and feedback also asked the University

to progress with proposals for a common marking scheme. The team heard that work is progressing with the identification of a preferred approach and that high-level principles have been established but that local tailoring of assessment schemes and marking criteria at school-level was proving challenging in some areas. The University should prioritise and complete the recommendation on assessment and feedback from ELIR 4, expediting progress to ensure that the work being undertaken is effective. In addition, the QESR team **recommends** that the University should take immediate action, within the current academic year, to ensure that the new Assessment and Feedback Principles and Priorities (developed in response to ELIR 4) are fully implemented in all schools, that feedback turnaround times and quality are monitored effectively, and that prompt action is taken to address any shortcomings.

26 The ELIR 4 team asked the University to progress with work to improve the recognition of teaching excellence across all aspects of the University. To aid recognition and support for academic staff development, and the promotion of academic staff based on teaching, the University is developing approaches to enhance support for professional development in teaching which is underpinned by a range of programmes delivered by the Institute for Academic Development. The University has also developed its HR policies to put greater emphasis on 'Contribution to Teaching' and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion considerations for implementation in AY 2024-25 with the aim of ensuring parity of teaching alongside research with associated promotion pathways. The team was informed that staff recognised that there had been improvements in the recognition of teaching but that there was still more to be done, particularly at school-level. The University provided the team with data on promotions but was unable to disaggregate them in terms of the different promotion routes. As such, it was not possible to determine the scale of improvement in recognition for leadership in teaching. The University should prioritise and complete the recommendation on promotion of academic staff based on teaching from ELIR 4, expediting progress to ensure that the work being undertaken is effective. In addition, the QESR team **recommends** that the University should clearly and accurately record data on promotion routes based on teaching excellence so it can effectively evidence the implementation of its goal to achieve parity between teaching and research, and take action to ensure this aim is met.

27 The University had a recommendation from ELIR 4 to consider how to address attainment gaps in student performance through the oversight, coordination and monitoring at an institutional level of school-level actions. Work has been undertaken through SQAC and the use of Thematic Reviews to identify awarding gaps. It is noted that schools have engaged but 'have struggled to understand the underlying causes or what good practice should be encouraged'. The University's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee (EDIC) has been engaged with trying to determine the underlying causes for sharing with schools. The associated baselines are planned to be incorporated into the annual monitoring cycle. The QESR team was informed that work is ongoing to support transition and progression, and that this is linked into the Curriculum Transformation Programme. The University should prioritise and complete the recommendation on attainment gap oversight, coordination and monitoring from ELIR 4, expediting progress to ensure that the work being undertaken is effective. In addition, the QESR team **recommends** that the University should pay particular attention to sharing good practice and supporting staff in understanding the causes of attainment gaps and taking effective action.

Sector-wide enhancement topic

28 The QESR team is confident that the University has effective arrangements in place to monitor and review its approach to defining and delivering an effective and inclusive digital/blended offering. The team considered Enhancement Topic related Project updates, Digital Strategy updates, uptake of relevant staff development opportunities, the SFC Report, Annual Outcome Agreement, minutes from key institutional committees, and met with staff and students.

29 The University's engagement with the sector-wide enhancement theme - 'The future of learning and teaching: Defining and delivering an effective and inclusive digital/blended offering' - is embedded in its Digital Strategy and through key strategic projects including the development of the new Learning and Teaching Strategy and digital education strand of the Curriculum Transformation Programme. It is underpinned by prior research and projects led by the Edinburgh Futures Institute (EFI) which, in 2022, launched a major suite of postgraduate taught hybrid programmes delivered through what the University calls 'fusion' teaching, which allows students to combine on-campus with online study, and teaches on-campus and online students together as a single cohort. Post-pandemic, the University has continued to invest in its digital infrastructure, reporting that 5,000 modules have been migrated to the new virtual learning environment (VLE) and it has invested in equipping 400 classrooms with audio visual equipment to support hybrid delivery. Realisation of the Digital Strategy has been enhanced through the formation of the new Digital Estate Prioritisation Group short-life working group (DEP) which will oversee the development and effective management and prioritisation of major digital estate investments.

30 Senior staff confirmed that student-facing professional services are required to reflect on how well they meet the needs of 'online and digital learners' and that thematic analysis of the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) has been used to support institutional understanding of differences in student satisfaction between student groups. Students that met with the QESR team expressed the view that sense of community can be negatively impacted by primary mode of study, and the University is aware that satisfaction for fully online students is lower on the theme of community than for other postgraduate taught students. Students reported an appetite for greater engagement with their academic peers through course or subject-level social events, and for staff support when trying to self-initiate opportunities to network with peers. Staff recognised the challenge of integrating different student cohorts and providing opportunities to collaborate when students are studying across different time zones.

Academic standards and quality processes

Key features of the institution's approach to managing quality and setting, maintaining, reviewing and assessing academic standards

31 The QESR team is confident that the University has effective arrangements in place for the monitoring and review of its approach to managing quality and to setting, maintaining, reviewing and assessing academic standards. The team considered the institution-led review reports, the University's approach to annual monitoring, papers and minutes from institutional committees, and met with staff and students.

32 The QESR team found that the University's arrangements for managing quality and setting standards meet the Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) and align with the guidance on quality issued by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). Institutional policies relating to programme and course development are aligned to sector expectations set out in the Quality Code, taking account of relevant Subject

Benchmark Statements, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and relevant qualification frameworks.

33 The University has in place an overarching framework for the annual monitoring of programmes which is undertaken for all credit-bearing provision and non-credit bearing massive open online courses (MOOCs). Internal Periodic Review (IPR) allows for an in-depth investigation of the quality of academic provision over a six-year cycle. The reports are published on the website, followed by a 14-week response and a year-on response. Student Support Service Annual Review and periodic, cross-service Thematic Review are also in place for Student Services and reports are considered by the Senate Quality Assurance Committee (SQAC). Clear and concise supporting documentation for staff and students include the IPR Handbook, IPR Guidance for Staff, ILR Guidance for Students and Thematic Review Guidance. Areas of good practice identified in the IPR reports are published annually on the university website, along with areas for further development with the University identifying where the proposed responsibility for action lies. The IPR Schedule, up to and including AY 2028-29, is published on the university website covering undergraduate, postgraduate and research provision.

34 At individual school-level, programme or programme cluster reports are provided to the School Director of Quality to inform the preparation of school annual quality reports. College quality committees (or equivalent) consider the annual reports, identifying themes and areas of good practice, and areas for further development. The annual monitoring templates are designed so that updates on key institutional issues are required to be included in the report - specifically, reflections on the Student Voice Policy, the Assessment and Feedback Principles and Priorities, and the industrial action. The University considers digital and blended learning as part of its broader approach to quality review - for example, via annual monitoring and IPR, some of these focusing specifically on online digital programmes.

35 Assessment and feedback have been identified as areas for development in the ELIR 2015 and ELIR 2021 reports and, in 2021, the University was asked to make demonstrable progress within the next academic year (detailed in paragraphs 23-25).

36 The responsibility for programme approval and programme modification is devolved to the University's schools and colleges and these are considered by Boards of Studies, which include student representation, that meet at least once a year. The Boards of Studies are required to confirm that all new programmes align with institutional strategy, are academically rigorous, align with the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and take account of Subject Benchmark Statements and Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) requirements.

37 The University has clearly mapped the arrangements for partnerships to the Quality Code and has an Academic Collaboration Advisory Group as the key contact for staff advice and guidance. A range of policies and a set of guidance documents set out the approval processes for the various collaborative agreements and provide a suite of templates to support schools in developing partnerships. The policies make clear the requirement for all academic collaborations to go through academic due diligence before collaborative proposals can be approved. Memorandum of Agreement templates include statements on the requirements for quality assurance, and the School Annual Quality Report template guidance on scope states that the report covers all taught, research and credit-bearing provision including collaborative provision and non-credit-bearing MOOCs. MOOCs are delivered in collaboration with a number of learning platforms and all courses associated with this are subject to the Programme and Course Approval and Management Policy. The University's remit for Internal Periodic Reviews states that the scope of these reviews includes provision delivered in collaboration with others.

Use of external reference points in quality processes

38 The QESR team is confident that the University has effective arrangements in place to monitor and review its approach to the use of external reference points in quality processes. In coming to this conclusion, the team considered the mapping of the quality processes against the Quality Code, minutes from the Senate Quality Assurance Committee (SQAC) and the Senate Academic Policy and Regulations Committee (APRC), analysis of external examiner reports, and the annual report to the Scottish Funding Council.

39 The University has recently updated its mapping to the Quality Code and the mapping documentation for each element of the Code is linked through to the associated policies which are published on the University's website. The University makes use of external reference points and expertise in the development of new programmes and in respect of major revisions. Approval of new programmes requires that the programme is aligned with the relevant Subject Benchmark Statement and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). There is also a requirement for the involvement of external expertise as well as consideration by PSRBs and employers, where relevant.

40 Internal Periodic Review (IPR) is the main process for assuring the ongoing maintenance of academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience. As such, there is a requirement that there is alignment with the external reference points as identified in the University Remit. In support of this function, IPR panels are required to include two external panel members. Exemplar reports of recent IPRs viewed by the QESR team confirmed the engagement of external members with relevant expertise and the rigour of the review process. Progress on university-level actions arising from the Annual Quality Reports and the IPRs is monitored by SQAC.

41 In their annual reports, external examiners are required to comment on the academic standards of the awards made by the University as well as the academic content. There is a requirement for the course/programme leads to respond to the feedback from the external examiners and the University also draws together thematic analyses of the external examiner reports for the dissemination of good practice which is considered by SQAC.

Use of data and evidence to inform self-evaluation and decision-making

42 The QESR team is confident that the University has effective arrangements in place to monitor and review its approach to the use of data and evidence to inform self-evaluation and decision-making. The team considered the SFC Report, institutional analysis of data on retention and progression, degree outcomes, complaints and appeals, use of data in annual monitoring processes, feedback from external examiners, and met with staff and students.

43 Institutional committees overseeing management of quality and standards - primarily Senate and its standing committees, the Education Committee (SEC) and Quality Assurance Committee (SQAC) - receive detailed reporting containing comprehensive analysis, where appropriate including sector-wide benchmarking, to inform reflection and development of strategy and policy relating to learning, teaching and the curriculum; and to monitor the quality of the student experience. SEC uses detailed analysis of National Student Survey (NSS) responses to identify issues affecting the student journey and inform any subsequent school, college or institutional-level actions in response. SQAC considers comprehensive analysis of degree outcome data, containing consideration of student attainment gaps; thematic analysis reports of complaints, appeals and student discipline cases; outcomes of institution-led review; and external examiner and annual monitoring activities - to monitor the quality and standards of student experience and reflect upon the effectiveness of quality assurance processes.

44 The QESR team heard that the University had progressed pre-pandemic plans to enhance its ability to engage with data through the creation of a Data Task Group (DTG). The new group will align with ongoing projects led by the University's Academic Policy and Regulations Committee, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee, Governance and Strategic Planning department, and Digital Estate Prioritisation group. Each of these groups had previously been reflecting independently on how existing data could be better used to understand the student body; what data is currently captured and at what point in the student journey; what additional data requirements might be needed; and their capacity to record, manage and share data meaningfully across the institution. The Student Analytics, Insights and Modelling (SAIM) team is currently strengthening data management processes by enhancing existing dashboard provision where entry requirement, widening participation and equality, diversity and inclusion data requests will be pulled together and made accessible for staff across the institution. The QESR team considered that this bringing together of activity, through the Data Task Group, would allow the University to make progress towards enhancing school-level understanding of student attainment gaps, given the increased range of data accessible during annual monitoring activities, and institutional-level understanding through the increased ability to identify and explore trends across subjects, disciplines and student groups (see also paragraph 27).

45 The Annual Report on Complaints Handling for AY 2021-22, considered by SQAC, reports over 1,000 complaint contacts received during AY 2021-23, with nine of these being reported as being progressed to Stage 2 investigation. The University cites a variety of reasons for the proportionately low level considered at Stage 2, including effective frontline management of complaints at Stage 1, complaints being resolved by way of an explanation, complaints being dealt with under another procedure, and complaints not being considered - for example, for being time-barred. The report to SQAC recommends that resource is made available for a data management system to manage complaints.

46 The QESR team considered reports provided to SQAC which used data from recent and historic complaints cases to identify common themes, factors driving the increase in case load and resource implications of the continuing trend. Consideration of this report by SQAC prompted the University to initiate an internal audit into the complaints handling process, recognising the need to have a better mechanism for recording complaints and managing cases, as 'limitations on data collection' had hampered the effectiveness of institutional analysis. Senior staff confirmed that an action plan has recently been approved and will be monitored through the Audit and Risk Committee. Academic Services confirmed that they have already recruited staff and are currently putting in place interim improvements. Staff that met with the QESR team confirmed that staff resource had been increased to manage the rise in complaints, and that consideration was being given to better reporting systems, and that there were no particular thematic areas of concern. Students confirmed that they are aware that there is a formal process in place for dealing with complaints.

47 The annual report on academic appeals for AY 2021-22, considered by SQAC, reports a year-on-year increase in academic appeals with an 8% increase on AY 2020-21, bringing the total number of appeals for AY 2021-22 to 386. The report also notes continued challenges with 'appeal turnaround times', a 'significant' case backlog and confusion among students around what constitutes a valid appeal. In response to the rise in appeals, Academic Services have recruited additional 'bank' staff that can be deployed during peak times to maintain appropriate staffing levels, with the aim of ensuring that all appeals are resolved in as timely a way as possible. Recognising that the number of upheld appeals has remained static, the University plans to complete 'pre-emptive' work with schools to strengthen staff communication with potential appellants, particularly around student understanding of a valid basis for appeals under the Student Appeal Regulations, and to empower staff to act to address student concerns under research and assessment

regulations which may provide an alternative to students submitting an appeal.

48 The University confirmed its plans to reflect upon the success of actions taken to resolve ongoing challenges with Complaints and Appeals processes, including completing sector benchmarking on complaints at the end of AY 2023-24 to establish whether trends diverge from sector expectations; learning from individual cases and reflecting on how expectations are being managed in terms of appeals. The QESR team acknowledges that the University is undertaking work to improve complaints management and would encourage the next external review team to follow up on progress made on this and in the internal monitoring of appeals trends.

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