



**University of Stirling**

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

**August 2022**

**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.

## **Follow-Up Report to Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR) 4**

**August 2022**

### **Introduction**

1. The University of Stirling's ELIR 4 review was originally scheduled to take place in autumn 2021 but was rearranged to spring 2022 as a result of the Covid19 pandemic. The Planning and Review Visits took place on 3 March 2021 and 19 – 23 April 2021 respectively.
2. Following the review, the University was pleased to receive the Review Panel's formal judgement which set out that the University has effective arrangements for managing academic standards and the student learning experience. It further set out confirmation of the positive nature of the judgement and that it means 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 provided for students.
3. The University found ELIR 4 to be valuable within our overall strategic approach to quality assurance and enhancement, and welcomes the formal recognition of the robustness of our arrangements that the outcome of the review provides.
4. Since the review, the University has reflected on both the commendations and the recommendations detailed in the Outcome and Technical Reports. The University is pleased to provide this follow-up report which describes the activity undertaken further and in response to the reports.

### **Endorsement of report**

5. This follow-up report was endorsed by University Court on 21 September 2022.

### **ELIR outcomes**

6. The outcome of the ELIR were disseminated throughout the University through communications with the University community and via University Court, Academic Council, and the Education and Student Experience committee structure.
7. The ELIR Monitoring Group formally oversees the planning of follow-up action in response to the outcomes of ELIR and undertakes formal monitoring of progress to ensure the required outcomes are achieved in a timely manner. The Group is chaired by the Deputy Principal (Education and Students), and its membership includes both staff members and student representatives. The nature of the action taken in response to the outcomes of ELIR 4 and the preparation of this report have therefore been overseen and contributed to, by the Group.

8. In the period since the review, the University has adopted the Addendum to the Strategic Plan 2016-21, which was approved for the period 2021-23, following reflections on the challenges presented by the Covid19 pandemic and our focus on recovery. Furthermore, consideration and development have progressed in respect of both a new Strategic Plan for the period 2023-28, and the 2022-23 Integrated Professional Services Plan. The outcomes of ELIR 4 continue to inform and be considered within both strands of strategic planning.
9. The University was commended through ELIR 4 for the following five areas of good practice which were set out in the Outcome Report:
- a) **Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic**  
*The University's response has been tailored, well-planned and agile in supporting the shift to the online delivery of learning, teaching and assessment, and continued to provide comprehensive student-facing support services. This has been effectively achieved through close partnership working with staff and students, underpinned by a coordinated approach to communications. Examples include the range of support available to both staff and students including training in the use of online technologies and the 'Students as Partners in Learning' approach which involved students 'road testing' newly developed online module content.*
  - b) **Learning environment**  
*The University has made significant progress with its vision for the student learning environment, undertaking a significant re-design and re-development of its facilities which effectively meets the diverse needs of students and staff and also supports engagement with local communities, through access to sports and other facilities, and the physical campus itself. The University proactively promotes and uses the campus as a learning environment within its programmes of studies. It has also effectively used its status as Scotland's University for Sporting Excellence to benefit the wider University population, positively supporting the development of the University's ethos of health and wellbeing, and the benefits of adopting an active lifestyle as components of the wider student experience.*
  - c) **Student support**  
*Recognising the diversity of its student population, the University has developed an extensive range of high quality and accessible student services that support the needs of all students. Examples include the 'Supporting Staff to Support Students' website; the support provided by Student Learning Services and the Library - tailored to the needs of specific groups and individuals; and the 'Stirling Essentials' module including the student-facing 'Prepare at Stirling' skills workshops.*
  - d) **Effectiveness of institution-led review**  
*The operation of the University's institution-led review process effectively supports self-evaluation and enhancement. Learning and Teaching Review is systematic, robust and results in demonstrable actions with timelines, that are rigorously monitored until completion. The review process has a number of positive features including the development of a 'student contribution' within a subject-area's self-evaluation document, prepared by the Students' Union and Faculty Officers. The University proactively pivoted to an online process during the COVID-19 pandemic resulting in the seamless transition of the Learning and Teaching Review.*
  - e) **Equality, diversity and inclusion**  
*Strong institutional commitment has ensured that equality, diversity and inclusion is embedded in the culture of the University and its collaborative partners. Its strategic approach to equality, diversity and inclusion has been developed, and is being delivered, in partnership with the Students' Union and is also underpinned by a comprehensive range of initiatives involving both staff and students.*

10. We have maintained our focus on these areas and built further upon the good practice highlighted by the review.
11. As the transition out of the Covid19 pandemic progresses, the University continues to reflect on the significant impact of our developments in technology enabled education, and aspects of delivery in place during the pandemic that we would wish to retain. Planning around learning and teaching is aligned with the University's strategic objectives, and internal developments relevant to digital learning platforms, and academic development. This internal development is progressing with an integrated approach across technology enabled learning spaces which facilitate greater flexibility, learning design, student engagement, and a partnership approach between academic and professional service teams.
12. The holistic learning environment has continued to evolve, with the opening of the new 'Campus Central' space in December 2021 creating new learning and social spaces for students, dedicated space for the Institute for Advanced Studies and a location in the heart of the campus for the Student Services Hub. The Campus Central project has also transformed the campus environment by removing traffic from the centre of the campus, and subsequently creating external social and relaxation spaces and enabling the building to be more connected to the campus landscape.
13. The University also continues to focus on further enhancement of our approaches to institution-led review, particularly in the context of the ELIR 4 commendation for the effectiveness of our approach, and the recommendation in respect of the review of student-facing professional services, and the national development of a tertiary sector quality framework. We have proactively contributed to the development work that has taken place up to this point on the new framework and will continue to do so going forward.
14. Since ELIR 4, work across the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion agenda has continued to progress extensively and on a collaborative basis within the institution. Our Mental Health Strategy (2021-24), Gender Based Violence Strategy (2021-24), Corporate Parenting Plan (2021-24), the Anti-Racism and Race Equality Strategy (2022-25) and an Institutional Safeguarding Framework have all been approved and implemented. An underpinning annual operating plan based on ten core themes that cut across all the strategic areas informs priorities and guides work on an annual basis.
15. The ELIR reports asked the University to consider five recommendations which are noted below along with details of the activity that has been progressed in relation to each.
16. **Management and sharing of data**  
*Complete the fundamental review of the University's approach to data management which is currently underway and use this opportunity to explore and maximise the benefits to be realised from the integration of key University information systems. In addition, there would be benefit to the University in ensuring that its approach to data management and reporting ensures all stakeholders, across all levels, have timely and tailored access to the information they require for operational, planning, decision-making and reporting purposes, in order to support its ambitions to enhance the student experience.*
  - i. The University's strategic focus on data structures and the use of data within our activity was discussed with the ELIR Panel during ELIR 4. These discussions, and the recommendation were useful in further informing areas for review and action to be progressed as the University continues to work through this complex but critical agenda. Activity has continued, enabled by collaboration between several University departments, to holistically review our technology, information architecture, data gathering mechanisms, reporting platforms and the reports necessary to support ongoing enhancement and improvements in the student learning experience.

- ii. Within an overall context of reorganisation of focus and staffing within the Information Services Directorate in line with strategic priorities, a Data Architect was recruited to the University in spring 2022. The purpose of this role is to contribute to the work to review, consolidate and simplify the complex data structures in place within the University's information architecture, and provide key input to achieving the aims of delivering a methodological approach to the management of business-critical data (Master Data Management). This information architecture work will include reviewing coding structures, data management arrangements, data quality and data processing and will seek to support ongoing preparation for HESA Data Futures and other regulatory reporting requirements.
- iii. System integration continues to be a key area of focus within our work on data management. Previous approaches to integration have resulted in some instances of unnecessary complexity and divergent data sets and we would like to ensure that integration design does not slow the pace of change and enhancement. As such, an approach to the development of integrations which is based on the consolidation of technology, converging on a common architecture, and using common data sets is now being adopted as standard. This has the potential to provide significant advantages including in respect of the ability to have a single source of data cascade to multiple recipients.
- iv. Initial review of reporting infrastructure and capability has highlighted a number of issues relevant to usability, functionality, age and value for money. A range of further issues have also been identified, which indicate large volumes of reports continuing to be generated through legacy reporting systems, in addition to the reporting provided through the institutional data warehousing. Rationalisation of these systems is underway in parallel with both underpinning work to implement a fully fit for purpose, sustainable and standardised architectural reporting solution, and expansion in the University's staff capacity and skill base in respect of data analysis and reporting. Overall, this will be a significant piece of work which will continue over a period of time, and in collaboration with teams and colleagues across the University, to ensure effectiveness for the range of University activity. Areas of focus will be prioritised institutionally on an ongoing basis in line with strategic delivery priorities and in light of associated development projects and their respective identified priorities. We anticipate that the investment in this work will result in important benefits through the delivery of an agreed suite of fit for purpose reports, transition from disparate systems to one consistent reporting platform, the introduction of a greater range of data dashboards, and functionality which supports the availability of management information in respect of complex data sets. These benefits will impact through the University's operation, including our quality assurance and enhancement arrangements and the aspirations we continue to work towards in relation to the data sets required to provide optimal support to annual monitoring and review at both module and programme levels, and periodic review.
- v. Concurrently, the University is continuing to progress a number of projects relevant to business systems and data operations. As discussed in the ELIR 4 process, work to fully implement a Curriculum Management System is continuing, as is the project to develop the University's use of Learning Analytics. Additionally, we have commenced a 'Student Processes and Systems Development' project with the aim of considering and prioritising enhancements to systems and processes to improve organisational efficiency and effectiveness in student-facing delivery, and the student experience. The work on this project will be closely aligned with the ongoing work on information architecture, data management methodology and data reporting.

17. **Review of student-facing professional services**

*Introduce a process for reviewing student-facing professional services that complements the current process of annual review, drawing on existing good practice in its approach to the institution-led review of its academic provision. This review process should ensure input from internal stakeholders - including students and external specialist expertise, be enhancement-led and provide appropriate oversight to support the University to evaluate the contribution of these services to the quality of the student experience.*

- i. Following the review, the University undertook to reflect on this recommendation and subsequently commenced a review of our approach to professional services review. The aim of this work is to enhance and develop the approach, building on the integrated review and planning approach that was discussed with the ELIR Panel, and to draw on the existing good practice in our arrangements for institution-led reviews of academic provision.
- ii. In parallel, the University has developed the integrated, enhancement approach to planning across services, and from 2022 'strategic snapshots' have become a requirement for each professional service area within its annual planning, in order to provide an overview of the service priorities, key risks and performance. It is anticipated that these snapshots will form a core information set for the new approach to Student-Facing Services Review that will be implemented from 2022/23.
- iii. The periodic Student-Facing Services Review approach will operate on a four to five year rolling programme, with each review addressing either an area of professional service practice or a particular theme such as, for example, careers and employability, mental health support, library and information, learning support. The priorities for review will be identified through the integrated strategic planning process.
- iv. The key aims of the service review will be to:
  - provide assurance about the quality of service provision
  - consider the effectiveness of services in creating or contributing to a quality culture and student experience
  - consider the effectiveness of arrangements to engage students in review and development of services
  - identify and disseminate good practice.
- v. The review process will include an initial self-evaluation of the practice or theme, and engagement with both staff and students. In addition, direct external input will inform each review via an external adviser who will normally be a relevant senior member of staff from another institution or expert in the relevant service or theme. This external adviser will be appointed to act as a member of the Review Panel alongside internal staff members and a student member who will be nominated by the Students' Union.
- vi. In undertaking the review, the panel will make effective use of external and internal frameworks and data, for example, the strategic snapshot, student feedback and relevant professional body requirements.

18. **Oversight of the postgraduate research student experience**

*Review the current governance and reporting arrangements for the Institute for Advanced Studies, to ensure these provide the University and in particular Academic Council, with appropriate and effective oversight of the totality of the postgraduate research student experience including student progression and awards, student feedback, and student engagement with training and research skills provision.*

- i. Governance arrangements for the Institute for Advanced Studies (IAS) were considered at the point the Institute was first established within the University and detailed in the IAS Development Plan 2019-20 to 2021-22.
- ii. In order to respond to this recommendation, action was progressed by the Dean for the IAS and the Academic Registrar from autumn 2021, to review the current governance and reporting approach, and within this consider aspects of committee remit, membership and meeting frequency, as well as IAS committee effectiveness.
- iii. The review highlighted that:
  - With the existing IAS committees and committee reporting structures having been in operation for almost two years, it would be beneficial to develop and update aspects of the terms of reference for each committee to facilitate optimal effectiveness.
  - Consideration required to be given to the future of the IAS External Engagement Committee. It had been intended that the committee would oversee IAS relationships with collaborating institutions and organisations, but its operation had been impacted by both the Covid19 pandemic and the developing landscape around the Institute's collaborations.
  - The IAS Executive Committee already engaged directly with both the University Research Committee and the Education and Student Experience Committee, both of which are committees of Academic Council, and there would be value in further exploring effective arrangements for triangulation of reporting through and across these forums in order to achieve holistic oversight of the postgraduate research student experience.
- iv. Consequently, it was agreed that effective oversight of the postgraduate research student experience will be achieved through the matrix of IAS and Academic Council committees and triangulation of reporting across the matrix. As such, the matters of business dealt with by the IAS committees and an agreed set of standard reports covering key aspects of postgraduate research matters including student progression and awards, student feedback and student engagement with skills development, will be reported to the Education and Student Experience Committee (ESEC) and the University Research Committee (URC) in a structured annual schedule. Since both ESEC and URC are committees of, and therefore report to, Academic Council, their considerations and scrutiny of these items of business and reports will in turn then be routinely reported to Academic Council to enable its own oversight and consideration.
- v. Fully reviewed and revised IAS committee Terms of Reference were developed and approved to further facilitate these enhanced arrangements, which will be implemented from the 2022-23 academic year.

19. **Research supervisor training**

*In the context of its ambition to grow postgraduate research student numbers, as a matter of priority the University is asked to review and clarify its requirements for the training and ongoing development of postgraduate research supervisors, ensuring these are clearly communicated to staff and that all supervisors (new and more established) have the opportunity to undertake these training and development requirements and appropriate mechanisms are in place to ensure completion is recorded and monitored.*

- i. The University discussed with the ELIR Panel, the review of research supervisor training that the Institute for Advanced Studies (IAS) had undertaken in the 2019/20 academic year. The review had been helpful in identifying requirements for development and opportunities for enhancement, and had resulted in refreshed content in the training provided.
- ii. The development of research supervisory practice continued to be an important area of focus, and ELIR 4 provided the University with further opportunity for reflection. Following the review, action was taken swiftly to address the recommendation regarding research supervisor training and in December 2021 the IAS Executive Committee agreed the following key principles governing professional development for PGR supervisors:
  - Engagement with ongoing professional development in relation to supervisory practice would be a mandatory requirement for PGR supervisors from January 2022.
  - Three different routes of professional development would be available for PGR supervisors, based on their level of expertise and experience (new supervisors, supervisors who are new to the University of Stirling and experienced supervisors).
- iii. Furthermore, the IAS engaged with each of the University's Faculties to undertake a comprehensive audit of the current supervisor training and development position in respect of the mandatory requirements in April 2022.
- iv. A communications plan, aligned with the implementation of the governing principles, and to ensure clear communication with all supervisors and other academic colleagues as required was also developed. As a result, all supervisors were contacted individually to confirm requirements and provide guidance on the training and support available and how this could be accessed.
- v. The professional development routes provided by the University consist of a programme of development activities available via the 'Researcher Development Programme' (RDP), and online modular content delivered through the Epigeum platform. The Researcher Development Programme exists to meet the generic, personal and professional development of researchers. In addition, the IAS now holds two 'Supervision Clinics' for PGR supervisors each semester.
- vi. All supervisors of PGRs are required to maintain engagement with supervisory development and training and to refresh their training within a maximum five-year period.
- vii. Engagement with supervisory training will be routinely and consistently monitored by the IAS, via a new, tailored database developed in advance of the 2022/23 academic year. Any gaps or issues that are highlighted through ongoing monitoring will be raised by IAS with the relevant Faculty, which will enable the Faculty to manage individual cases where, for example, training has lapsed or the mandatory training requirement has not been met.
- viii. Standard reporting on supervisory training activity and engagement to both the Doctoral Committee at the final meeting each semester and the IAS Executive Committee will provide further opportunities for monitoring and the determination of any corresponding action that may be appropriate.



- ix. There are a number of advantages of the enhanced approach to research supervisor training. PGR supervision is a complex and evolving practice and the provision of appropriate support nurtures continuing development and develops a distinct community of practice around supervision. Supervision and supervisors have a significant and crucial role in student outcomes and experience and by improving support for supervisors we also enhance the research environment for our students. The University will continue to build upon the positive progress already achieved in respect of research supervisor training, and reflect on an ongoing basis on further opportunities for enhancement.

## 20. External examiners

*Ensure that all students have clear information about the work of external examiners including their role, have easy access to the external examiners' reports for their programmes of study and are also clear about how these can be accessed.*

- i. The University noted in the Reflective Analysis prepared for ELIR 4 that prior to the onset of the Covid19 pandemic, we had begun to review our arrangements for consideration of External Examiner reports. This was interrupted by the pandemic but remained an important area for review and enhancement.
- ii. Reflecting on the outcomes of ELIR 4 and the recommendation, the University decided to undertake a holistic review of arrangements for external examining, including processes for the appointment of External Examiners and the format of reports, in addition to considering approaches to ensure students have access to information regarding the role and input of external examiners within the University and their reports.
- iii. Ahead of the 2022/23 academic year, a short guide for students on external examining was prepared, accompanying the corresponding policy and seeking to ensure clear detail, that is easy to engage with, could be made available to students. The information was published on the University's website, and positioned within the site as part of an overall restructure of webpages providing information on quality assurance and enhancement, and student-facing information relevant to the student journey. Faculties and services were also made aware of the availability of the information.
- iv. External Examiner reports have consistently been made available to relevant University committees, the membership of which includes student representatives. Consequently, student representatives have direct access to the reports and follow-up discussions. The consideration and discussion of external examiner reports within the committee structure, and the involvement of student representatives remains an important aspect of the University's approach to making the reports and their content available to students.
- v. In addition, from 2022/23, all External Examiner reports (with the exception of any confidential reports that an External Examiner chooses to make separately and directly to the Principal), will be made available in full to students. This will be facilitated through the individual programme pages on the VLE, however reports will also be available to students on request, via a point of contact detailed in the guide for students on external examining.
- vi. As part of the overall review of external examining processes, responsibility for development, implementation and management of these processes was consolidated within the Academic Quality and Governance area of Academic Registry, having previously been positioned across two areas of the team. It is anticipated that this revised approach will provide further opportunity to optimise both efficient operation and the effectiveness and impact of external examining activity within the University.

- vii. Reflection will be undertaken during and at the conclusion of the 2022/23 academic year to consider any further enhancement or development that may be beneficial to the approach to making information on external examining and External Examiner reports available to students. Engagement with student representatives will form an important part of this reflection.

### **Concluding Comments**

21. The preparation for ELIR 4 and engagement with its outcomes have been valuable and important drivers for the University's continuing enhancement of our quality arrangements and the student learning experience.
22. The University welcomed the opportunities for reflection and evaluation that the review provided, within the overall institutional approach to quality assurance and enhancement, which includes institution-led review and our consistently proactive engagement with the national Enhancement Themes. We look forward to engaging further with development planning in respect of the new tertiary sector quality framework, and with each phase of implementation of the new framework in the coming years.

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