

Enhancement-led Institutional Review of University of Stirling

Outcome Report

April 2021



Contents

About the Enhancement-led Institutional Review method	1
About this review.....	1
About the University of Stirling.....	2
Threshold judgement about the University of Stirling.....	3
Commendations	3
Recommendations	4
What happens next?.....	5
Further information.....	5

About the Enhancement-led Institutional Review method

The QAA website explains the method for [Enhancement-led Institutional Review \(ELIR\)](#) and has links to the ELIR handbook and other informative documents.¹ You can also find out more about the [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education \(QAA\)](#).²

Further details about ELIR can be found in an accompanying [brief guide](#),³ including an overview of the review method, information about review teams, and explanations of follow-up action.

About this review

This is the Outcome Report of the ELIR conducted by QAA at the University of Stirling. The review took place as follows: Planning Visit on 3 March 2021 and Review Visit on 19-23 April 2021. The review was conducted by a team of five reviewers:

- Professor Jeremy Bradshaw (Academic Reviewer)
- Emeritus Professor Hilary Grainger (Academic Reviewer)
- Mr Brian Green (Academic Reviewer)
- Ms Alice Foulis (Student Reviewer)
- Mr Paul Probyn (Coordinating Reviewer).

This report sets out the threshold judgement formed by the ELIR team on:

- the current and likely future effectiveness of the institution's arrangements for managing academic standards and enhancing the quality of the student learning experience.

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

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

The impact of COVID-19

The ELIR was originally scheduled to take place during autumn 2020. This was after the start of the national lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in the ELIR cycle being delayed and a number of ELIRs from spring 2020 being rescheduled to autumn. In discussion with the University of Stirling and the Scottish Funding Council, the University of Stirling ELIR was rescheduled to March and April 2021 as detailed above. QAA made some amendments to the ELIR process to accommodate the ongoing pandemic, most notable of which was that the ELIR was conducted entirely online.

The ELIR was undertaken while the pandemic, and the institution's response to it, was a key part of the context. Although this was part of the context of the review, the team considered the institution's approach to quality and standards from the time of the last ELIR in 2015. It is

¹ About ELIR:

www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/en/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review

² About QAA: www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland

³ Brief Guide to ELIR: www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/reports/brief-guide-to-elir-method.pdf

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

acknowledged that the review took place at what was a very challenging time, and the ELIR team and QAA Scotland are grateful to staff and students for their engagement in the review.

About the University of Stirling

The University of Stirling was established by Royal Charter in 1967, admitting its first students in that year. It is accommodated on a distinctive 330-acre campus on the edge of the city of Stirling. The campus includes the 18th century Airthrey Castle, Airthrey Loch, the Grade A listed Pathfoot Building, the MacRobert Arts Centre, and Stirling Court Hotel. Since the last ELIR (2015), the University has developed its campus environment and facilities for teaching and research through a number of major capital projects. The University states that it is committed to environmental sustainability in the development of the campus.

The campus is also home to a dedicated on-campus study centre housing INTO University of Stirling, a joint venture with INTO University Partnerships. The University is designated Scotland's 'University for Sporting Excellence' and encourages all members of the University community to engage with fitness and wellbeing as a part of their daily life.

The University's vision is to be recognised across the world as 'a university that addresses the needs of society through innovative interdisciplinary research, learning and teaching of the highest quality and by sharing knowledge with the world'. Its values are defined as excellence, openness, and ambition.

The University's current Strategic Plan was originally intended to run from 2016 to 2021. Within the Plan there are three overarching institutional ambitions: to be one of the top 25 universities in the UK; to increase annual income by £50 million; and to enhance the research profile by 100%, 'whilst ensuring that internationalisation is at the heart of everything the University does'. In the light of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, in September 2020, the University Court agreed to extend the current Plan by two years to 2023.

Based on 2020-21 figures, the University had a total of approximately 10,900 full-time equivalent (FTE) students based at its Stirling campus. Of these students, 79.3% were undergraduate, 17.4% were postgraduate taught, and 3.2% were postgraduate research. 65% of students were classified as Scottish, with 11% from the rest of the UK (rUK); 12% from the European Union (EU); and 12% stated to be non-EU international. Over 120 nationalities were represented in the student body.

Threshold judgement about the University of Stirling

The University of Stirling has **effective** arrangements for managing academic standards and the student learning experience.

This is a positive judgement, which means that the University meets sector expectations in securing the academic standards of its awards and enhancing the quality of the student learning experience it provides, currently and into the future. This judgement confirms there can be public confidence in the University's awards and in the quality of the learning experience it provides for its students.

Commendations

- 1 The University is commended for the following areas of good practice.
- 2 **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.
- 3 **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.
- 4 **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.
- 5 **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.
- 6 **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.

Recommendations

7 The University is asked to consider the following recommendations.

8 **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.

9 **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.

10 **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.

11 **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.

12 **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.

What happens next?

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

14 One year after publication of the ELIR Outcome and Technical Reports, institutions are asked to provide a Follow-up Report to indicate how they are responding to the outcomes of ELIR. The final version of the institution's Follow-up Report is published on the QAA website. Institutions also engage in a range of enhancement and development activities including Focus On projects where institutions work collaboratively to improve policy and practice relating to topics that are frequently occurring in ELIR outcomes.

Further information

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

16 This review and its findings relate to the institution as a whole and do not provide information about individual programmes of study or subjects. For further information about those, contact the institution or visit its [website](#).

17 University sector institutions in Scotland also engage in systematic Enhancement Theme activity. Further information about that work, which has a sector-wide and institutional focus, can be found on the [Enhancement Themes website](#).

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

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

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