

Enhancement-led Institutional Review of University of the Highlands and Islands

Outcome Report

May 2016

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About the Enhancement-led Institutional Review method

A dedicated page of the QAA website explains the method for [Enhancement-led Institutional Review](#) of higher education institutions in Scotland and has links to the ELIR handbook and other informative documents.¹ You can also find more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.² Further details about the enhancement-led approach can be found in an accompanying [ELIR information document](#),³ including an overview of the review method, definitions of the judgement categories, and explanations of follow-up action. It also contains information on the Scottish Funding Council's response to ELIR judgements.

About this review

This is the Outcome Report of the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at the University of the Highlands and Islands. The review took place as follows: Part 1 visit on 12 to 14 April 2016 and Part 2 visit on 23 to 27 May 2016. The review was conducted by a team of six reviewers:

- Professor Peter Bush (Academic Reviewer)
- Mr Patrick Devlin (Academic Reviewer)
- Professor Hilary Grainger (Academic Reviewer)
- Associate Professor Gordon Suddaby (International Reviewer)
- Mr Paul Greene (Student Reviewer)
- Mr Paul Probyn (Coordinating Reviewer).

In advance of the review visits, the University submitted a self-evaluative document (the Reflective Analysis) and an advance information set, comprising a range of materials about the institution's arrangements for managing quality and academic standards. In addition, the University submitted two case studies on the Learning and Teaching Academy and the regional student representation project.

This report sets out the overarching 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.

It is possible for the overarching judgement to be expressed in three levels which indicate that the institution's arrangements are: effective; have limited effectiveness; or are not effective. More detail on these categories is provided in the ELIR information document.

The overarching judgement for this report can be found on page 3, followed by the areas of positive practice and the areas for development.

A more detailed [Technical Report](#) is also available for this review.⁴ The Technical Report sets out the ELIR team's findings under each of the headings in the ELIR 3 method.

¹ Further information about the ELIR method:

www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/enhancement-led-institutional-review.

² Further information about QAA: www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us.

³ ELIR information document: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=61.

⁴ Technical report: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/provider?UKPRN=10007114

About the University of the Highlands and Islands

The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) is Scotland's newest university having gained university title in 2011. Its mission is to have a transformational impact on the prospects of the region, its economy, its people and its communities. UHI is a regional federal-collegiate partnership which provides vocational training and education, degree programmes, and research and knowledge exchange activity across a range of cognate areas. The partnership encompasses an Executive Office and 13 Academic Partners (APs). The APs comprise colleges of further and higher education, research institutions and specialist colleges. Each AP is an institution with its own distinctive focus and mission which has entered into an academic partnership agreement with the University.

In 2014-15, UHI had 8,300 (6,042 FTE) higher education students of whom over 90 per cent were undergraduate, around 5 per cent were postgraduate taught, and under 2 per cent were postgraduate research.

Overarching judgement about the University of the Highlands and Islands

The University of the Highlands and Islands has **effective** arrangements for managing academic standards and the student learning experience. These arrangements are likely to continue to be effective in the future.

This is a positive judgement, which means the University has robust arrangements for securing academic standards and for enhancing the quality of the student experience.

Areas of positive practice

- 1 The ELIR has identified a number of areas of positive practice and these are summarised below.
- 2 **Development of the Strategic Plan** – the manner of developing the Strategic Plan, including open communication and consultation, has secured a strong sense of ownership of the Plan among the academic community as well as fostering a clear sense of UHI identity. There is close alignment between the UHI Plan and the plans of the 13 academic partners (APs). This provides a secure foundation for the University to build upon as it begins to implement the Strategy.
- 3 **Widening access** – the University has a proactive and multi-faceted approach to widening access including continued support once students are admitted. A range of activities are embedded in the University's practice including extensive and effective use of the recognition of prior learning (RPL), and active networks with schools and colleges. Support after admission is provided through the Personal Academic Tutors (PATs) and programme leaders.
- 4 **Welcoming academic community** – the University has been successful in fostering a strong sense of belonging and community among its students. It has a distributed nature and has successfully managed to adapt to local environments while also fostering a sense of UHI community across the institution. This produces a positive experience for undergraduate and postgraduate students. The postgraduate research students are well supported in their academic partners and through the UHI Graduate School.
- 5 **Personal Academic Tutor system** – the PAT system is well-embedded, effective and positively evaluated by students across UHI including students studying abroad.
- 6 **Continuing value of the Red Button feedback device** – the Red Button device encourages students to raise any issues directly with the UHI Executive Office and it is evident that a fast response is received.
- 7 **Educational Development Unit** – the EDU provides a high quality service for the development of online learning resources and a comprehensive range of training to support staff in delivering online teaching.
- 8 **Blended learning standards** – the University has developed a set of blended learning standards that are scholarly and have attracted interest from universities internationally. These have been used in the development of new programmes, which is positive. There would be benefit in the University introducing the standards across all of its provision.

9 **Programme development** – there is a comprehensive and detailed approach to programme development involving the UHI academic partners at all stages of the development phase, and significant external expertise in the approval process.

10 **Documentation in support of quality procedures** – the handbooks and materials produced to support key quality processes are clear and comprehensive. The External Examiner Guidance, the Postgraduate Code of Practice for Students and Supervisors the Academic Standards and Quality Regulations and the Collaborative Handbook represent particularly positive practice.

11 **Self-evaluative approach** – UHI undertakes self-evaluation, which is constructively critical and informed by well-managed data, at every level of the institution. The processes for undertaking the evaluation are well-understood by the wide range of staff who are engaged in carrying out the activity.

Areas for development

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

13 **Realising the benefit of the Student Partnership Agreement** – build upon the positive relationship between the University and the newly established Highlands and Islands Student Association (HISA) to realise the benefits of capturing and progressing joint work through the Student Partnership Agreement.

14 **Student feedback** – continue working to ensure students are aware of the ways in which their feedback is being listened to and acted upon.

15 **Graduate attributes** – continue to work with programme teams to ensure that students and staff have greater awareness of the University's defined set of graduate attributes.

16 **Student retention** – build on existing positive activity to develop an institution-wide strategic approach to address the challenges of non-continuation.

17 **Assessment** – further develop the management of assessment to include an institution-wide approach for monitoring feedback on assessment and the introduction of a criterion-referenced grading system for all undergraduate degree programmes.

18 **Availability of external examiner reports** – promote student understanding of the external examiner role by making examiners' reports available to all students as promoted in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code).

19 **Staff development policy** – develop an overarching staff development policy in support of delivering the University strategies.

20 **Support for postgraduate students who teach** – build on the existing pilot arrangements to ensure that all postgraduate students who teach are trained and supported for the role.

21 **Mapping policy and practice against the Quality Code** – consider the benefits of producing a single document which maps the University's policies and practices to the expectations of the Quality Code, drawing on the incremental approach already adopted as new chapters were published.

22 **Strategic approach to developing collaborative partnerships** – progress the intention to develop a University strategy for developing collaborative links including articulating priorities for the development of international academic partnerships.

What happens next?

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

24 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. Institutions also engage in a follow-up event with colleagues from other institutions to explore the ways in which the ELIR outcomes are being implemented. The final version of the institution's follow-up report is published on the QAA website.

Further information

25 A more detailed [Technical Report](#) is also available for this review. The Technical Report sets out the ELIR team's findings under each of the headings in the ELIR 3 method.

26 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](#).

27 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](#).

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

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

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