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

Technical 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 Technical 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 from 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.

About this report

In this report, the ELIR team:

- delivers an overarching judgement 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 overarching judgement can be found on page 3, followed by the detailed findings of the review given in numbered paragraphs.

ELIR Technical Reports are intended primarily for the institution which hosted the review, and to provide an information base for the production of thematic reports that identify findings across several institutions.

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

Technical Reports set out the ELIR team's view under each of the report headings. Shorter Outcome Reports are provided that set out the main findings of the ELIR for a wider audience. The Outcome Report for this review is on the QAA website.[4]

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[4] Outcome Report: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/provider?UKPRN=10007114

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.

1 Institutional context and strategic framework

1.1 Key features of the institution's context and mission

1   The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) is Scotland's newest university having gained university title in 2011. It 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.

2   At the time of the current ELIR, UHI had applied for research degree awarding powers and was awaiting confirmation of the outcome of that scrutiny process. The planning of the application had taken place over the preceding three years, led by the Deputy Principal and a small group of senior colleagues. The final submission to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's Advisory Committee on Degree Awarding Powers was approved by the University Court, Academic Council, and Research Committee.

3   UHI's mission is to have a transformational impact on the prospects of the region, its economy, its people and its communities.

4   In 2014-15, the University 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. The Partnership Planning Forum (PPF), comprising senior managers from all APs and the Executive Office, is a key cross-partnership body whose core role concerns the planning of student numbers. PPF works with faculties and APs to align curriculum and student number planning with the critical performance indicators (CPIs) contained in the University's strategic plan.

5   The Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013 identifies UHI as the Regional Strategic Body with responsibility for planning, funding and monitoring of further education (FE) delivery across the Highlands and Islands. As a consequence, the University Court was reconstituted and took over full responsibility for governance of the University in July 2014 following Privy Council consent to the required changes to UHI's Articles of Association. A new committee of Court, the Further Education Regional Board (FERB), was established. Through FERB, the University discharges its responsibilities for supporting a regional approach to the planning and funding of FE provision, monitoring college performance, and meeting the terms of the FE Regional Outcome Agreement with the Scottish Funding Council.

6   The University's academic structure is based on two faculties: Science, Health and Engineering; Arts, Humanities and Business. Each faculty is divided into three subject networks. The subject networks fulfil a cross-partnership role, coordinating academic activity across multiple sites. They are discipline-based groups broadly equivalent to departments or schools in other institutions, whose purpose is to establish and develop subject-focused academic communities for development, review and enhancement of academic provision. At the time of the 2012 ELIR, there were eight subject networks. Since then there has been a restructuring aimed at facilitating greater coherence in the curriculum and planning function of the subject networks. The faculty and subject network structures have explicit responsibilities for curriculum planning, management and quality assurance processes, discharged through the faculty board and executive structures.

7   A new Principal and Vice-Chancellor was appointed in June 2014. Following a period of consultation and development, which included a series of workshops involving AP Principals and senior staff from the Executive Office, the Strategic Vision and Plan 2015-20 was published in April 2015. This identifies the University's strategic vision to become the UK's leading integrated university, encompassing higher and further education. The Strategic Plan contains three 'strategic themes': UHI's students; focused research; the University for all of the region. Each theme is supported by a range of CPIs which were approved by the University Court in March 2015. An intentionally small number of CPIs was developed in order to facilitate high-level monitoring of progress against strategic objectives. Subsequently, each CPI has been subdivided into a series of specific key performance indicators (KPIs) at the operational planning level, intended to enable effective, ongoing self-evaluation. The Strategic Vision and Plan 2015-20 also contains three 'cross-cutting themes': enterprise and innovation; internationalisation; recognition, reputation and brand and three resource-focused 'enabling strategies': people; infrastructure; and financial sustainability.

8   The Learning and Teaching Academy (LTA) was established in 2013, in part to address the areas for development identified in the 2012 ELIR report relating to supporting staff development and sharing good practice. The LTA is led by a recently-appointed Chair of Pedagogy and is overseen by the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC). Its overarching aim is to establish a national and international reputation for learning and teaching excellence. Consequently, it seeks to promote and coordinate professional development, scholarly activity and research across the partnership, and to act as a focus for pedagogic research. It is envisaged that the LTA will be the locus for driving pedagogic innovation and excellence, and developing pedagogic research as a significant area of activity. A key element of its work will be the upskilling of staff. Professional recognition of excellence in learning and teaching will be coordinated through the LTA, an initial priority being to substantially increase the number of staff recognised at an appropriate level of Fellowship by the Higher Education Academy.

9   In its Reflective Analysis (RA), the University stated that engagement with the ELIR process would inform its thinking about how best to target and prioritise its enhancement initiatives over the next period. In discussion with the ELIR team, senior staff indicated that, in light of the extent of change since the 2012 ELIR, the University would welcome reflection on its direction of travel and future priorities, affirmation that its current priorities are appropriate, and comment on its use of benchmarking and external and internal review.

1.2   Strategic approach to enhancing learning and teaching

10   QAEC, established in 2013, is the University's key strategic body for quality enhancement. It is chaired by the Deputy Principal and its membership comprises senior managers across the Executive Office and APs and a student member. QAEC has

responsibility for institutional oversight of quality assurance and quality enhancement agendas and priorities. Its extensive remit includes developing and monitoring learning and teaching strategies. Faculties and subject networks also contribute to enhancing learning and teaching, particularly in supporting and developing academic teams at different locations, and sharing good practice.

11   At the time of the 2012 ELIR, the University's approach to enhancing learning and teaching was contained in a single document, the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. Rarely used by staff, the document was considered too extensive to be implemented at programme level yet not sufficiently broad to reflect the diversity of pedagogic approaches employed. As a result, at the time of the current ELIR, the University was taking what it described as 'a multi-faceted and evolutionary approach' to its learning and teaching strategies, aimed at developing a culture of innovation and enhancement which supports the 'best fit' for a given context and the needs of the students. A draft set of overarching precepts had been developed, these having been endorsed by QAEC in 2014. The LTA Forum, chaired by the Head of the LTA, is leading the further development of the precepts, and consulting on the content and development of a revised Learning and Teaching Strategy which will be implemented incrementally from academic year 2016-17.

1.3   Effectiveness of the approach to implementing strategies

12   The Strategic Vision and Plan 2015-20 identifies how progress in meeting the University's objectives will be measured. During the early stages of implementing the Strategic Plan, the University's focus has been on assessing progress against the measures outlined in the Regional Outcome Agreement. Consequently, at this stage in the execution of the Strategic Plan, it is not possible for the ELIR team to reach a clear view on the effectiveness of its implementation. Equally, it is too early to draw conclusions regarding the emerging Learning and Teaching Strategy. Nonetheless, a range of evidence is available to suggest that the University has an effective approach to implementing its strategies.

13   Staff who met the ELIR team affirmed that a reflective and consultative approach had been taken to developing the Strategic Vision and Plan 2015-20. They indicated that they felt a sense of ownership of the Plan and it was evident that recently developed AP plans, while locally contextualised, aligned with the Plan. In addition, faculty plans are explicitly aligned with institutional strategic objectives contained in the Strategic Vision and Plan 2015-20. It was also clear that the Strategic Plan, including the CPIs, was beneficial in providing a focus for setting and monitoring objectives.

14   Developments in the University senior management and committee structure provide evidence that UHI has demonstrated effectiveness in its approach to developing and managing its strategies. Since the 2012 ELIR, the senior management team has been strengthened. Two additional vice principals were appointed in 2013, one for research and one for further education. In addition, the Vice Principal (Academic) became Deputy Principal and now oversees all academic activity, the University Secretary became Chief Operating Officer and Secretary, the two faculty deans took on additional duties as assistant principals responsible for curriculum growth and curriculum enhancement, a Dean of Students was appointed, and the role of Academic Registrar was re-established. The academic committee structure has been revised with a view to maintaining a focus on enhancement in all areas of activity, improving decision making, and locating accountability at the appropriate level. Accordingly, QAEC takes a more strategic institutional role than did the (now disbanded) Learning Teaching and Quality Committee. Staff confirmed to the ELIR team that QAEC devolves leadership, policy development and implementation to appropriately empowered groups and individuals.

15   In conclusion, the ELIR team regards the University's approach to developing and managing its strategies as an area of positive practice. The manner of developing the Strategic Vision and Plan 2015-20, 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 increasingly close alignment between the UHI Plan and the plans of the 13 APs. This provides a secure foundation for the University to build upon as it begins to implement its Strategy.

2   Enhancing the student learning experience

2.1   Composition and key trends in the student population, including typical routes into and through the institution

16   The total student headcount in 2014-15 was 8,300. There has been a significant increase in student numbers across the partnership, with the proportion of students below the age of 25 increasing to 48 per cent of the total population in 2014-15. The proportion of full-time students has also increased, from 52 per cent in 2011-12 to 62 per cent in 2014-15.

17   The vast majority of the student population comes from Scotland (93 per cent) and a large proportion (74 per cent) are recruited from within the immediate catchment area. A high proportion of students are mature and part-time in comparison to other Scottish universities although there has been a shift towards more full-time study, 62 per cent of UHI students were studying full-time in 2014-15.

18   Over 90 per cent of UHI students are undergraduate, with around 5 per cent postgraduate taught and under 2 per cent postgraduate research. Over half of the undergraduate students are studying 'other undergraduate' programmes (essentially programmes other than degrees) including Scottish Qualifications Authority, continuing professional development and other professional or vocational awards, although the proportion of these is decreasing (from 61 per cent in 2011-12 to 52 per cent in 2014-15).

19   The University has a small number of international students across all levels of study, which has seen a small overall decrease in recent years. While UHI identified its intention to increase international student numbers, it is anticipated that these will be limited largely to distance learning programmes.

Typical routes into and through the institution

20   Most programmes at UHI have a range of access routes including entry with traditional school qualifications (Highers or A Levels). There is a small but growing number of students (25 in 2014-15) entering via Access to HE (higher Education) courses which are intended to boost learner confidence and provide the skills to study at HE level. Many students articulate onto a UHI programme after studying further education or Higher National awards.

21   UHI continues to develop flexible and innovative approaches to programme structure. Although the University has increasingly moved to offer four-year honours degrees, it has deliberately retained the 1+2 and 2+1 structures in some, but not all, subject areas. Staff indicated that the new degree structures and articulation arrangements are in place to support widening access. Students who met the ELIR team provided positive feedback regarding the flexibility of programme structures. The team noted that students can study a module from a degree programme alongside a Higher National award to assist in the transition to degree programmes. Students who met the team provided a range of views about their experience of progression from Higher National awards to degree programmes,

although they did speak positively about the role of the Personal Academic Tutors (PATs) during these transitions (see paragraph 53).

Widening participation

22   UHI stated that widening access is fundamental to its mission. Its approach to widening access is set out in its Wider Access Framework 2015 and is 'mainstreamed' at the institution which staff explained to the ELIR team means work to support widening access is managed through normal business practices rather than being monitored in a specific area. A range of activities are in place to support widening participation including active networks with schools and colleges and the effective use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Support after admission is provided through the PATs and programme leaders, which received positive feedback from students.

23   The Wider Access Framework indicates that widening participation is at the heart of UHI school liaison activity, and schools with lower than average progression to higher education are identified among the University's priority groups. The UHI Regional Schools Group aims to develop and oversee the delivery of a partnership-wide strategy for increasing the further and higher education curriculum offered to and used by schools and school pupils within the region. This is achieved using delivery models appropriate to local needs. A portfolio of new modules as well as aspects of the existing curriculum are being made more accessible to prospective students. This kind of collaboration with schools is being piloted in several areas and UHI is evaluating its success in terms of take-up and achievement.

24   The University identifies admissions policy and practice as vital aspects of widening access. A review of admissions was undertaken in 2013 which led to revised policy, processes and regulations. UHI established a working group on contextualised admissions during 2015-16 to develop training and support for academic decision makers. The ELIR team noted that positive progress had been made in this area, a key outcome being a contextualised admissions policy which the University indicated would be implemented for the 2017-18 entry cohort.

25   UHI encourages applications from prospective students who may not have standard entry qualifications, either certified or experiential. The University indicated that it now receives more than 400 RPL applications each academic year to consider prior formal and informal learning to gain academic credit towards UHI awards. The process is managed through an RPL Panel which operates with delegated authority from the relevant exam board. The ELIR team saw evidence of a consistent approach to RPL being adopted across the institution and heard positive feedback from students who had benefited from the scheme.

Retention

26   UHI highlighted that it had achieved significant improvement in its overall retention rates since the 2012 ELIR, reflecting positive steps taken to enhance the student experience and improve data integrity and reporting. In particular, there had been an improvement in retention among full-time degree students, with UHI performing above the Scottish average benchmark for some student groups. It was acknowledged that, for the 2013-14 dataset, the measure of non-continuation was lower than the benchmark across all degree entrants (11.4 per cent compared to the benchmark of 10.9 per cent) which was less positive than the previous year. However, the trend over the past seven years showed a fall in non-continuation, which is positive.

27   The University identifies multiple factors affecting the headline statistics including the economic and employment context and the composition of the student population in

comparison to other universities. UHI also emphasised that some students recorded as non-continuing move to other study or employment. Retention is monitored at institutional and programme level through the annual monitoring activity (see paragraph 132).

28   The ELIR team learned about a variety of action being taken to address non-continuation in addition to careful data monitoring including ensuring good support structures are in place for students, making use of longitudinal induction, monitoring student study activity to identify any lack of engagement (for example with blended learning), and ensuring curriculum design supports student retention. The team also heard that UHI has a strategic group focusing on non-continuation. While all of these activities are positive, the University is encouraged to develop an explicit institution-wide strategic approach to addressing the challenges of non-continuation.

2.2   Supporting equality and diversity in the student population

29   The University has an effective approach to supporting equality and diversity across the partnership. UHI recognises both a regional and local perspective are required to consider the different contexts from city-based campuses to remote, rural learning centres. UHI has an Equality Outcomes Group to support the implementation of policies and strategies on equality and diversity relating to students, curriculum and staff. The Equality Outcomes Plan 2013-17 details the actions taken and progress towards mainstreaming equality outcomes that UHI plans to deliver during this period. UHI has appointed an Equality Outcomes Advisor to work on a cross-partnership basis to refine the Equality Outcomes Plan at strategic regional level. Recent activity has included producing an updated Equality Charter and drafting a set of regional equality outcomes.

Disabled students

30   UHI has a strong accessibility ethos and a positive approach to the support of disabled students. The proportion of students declaring a disability has increased from 10 per cent in 2011-12 to 15 per cent in 2014-15, with 5 per cent of those indicating dyslexia or another learning disability.

31   The University is accredited by the Scottish Government to conduct needs assessments with students for the purposes of claiming Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) and the University has conducted 230 needs assessments since achieving accreditation in 2011 and, at the time of the current ELIR in 2015-16, just under 1,500 personal learning support plans had been created. In 2012 UHI won the JISC Innovation and Technology Award: Access and Inclusion for its case study on assessing the needs of remote learners using VC technology. At the time of the current ELIR, there were 12 qualified DSA assessors, with more practitioners in training. The Disability Support Coordinator also undertakes peripatetic assessments.

32   The work in this area has prompted the development of inclusive policies and practices more widely, for example the recording taught sessions policy aimed at disabled students has been made available to all students. The student information system has the ability to manage data relating to students with disclosed additional needs including identifying student engagement with support services and a user-friendly interface has been developed to improve access to data. On demand reports are available to provide details of specific student requirements, such as exam arrangements and records student interactions with support services.

33   The ELIR team also learned that the status of the Disability Practitioner Group has been strengthened and there is a positive approach to the support of disabled students with an emphasis on quality and equality of student experience.

Care leavers

34   UHI identifies care leavers as a priority group for increasing participation and is taking action to target recruitment and provide ongoing support once students are enrolled. UHI acknowledged that it is challenging to identify the exact numbers of its students who are care leavers but work is being taken to address this including through a practitioner group. A flag appears on application forms if the student declares and additional support is put in place. The ELIR team heard that considerable progress had been made across the partnership in this area. Some academic partners have the BUTTLE UK Quality Mark and transition coordinators are employed at the APs to provide direct support for care leavers.

2.3   Engaging and supporting students in their learning

35   UHI highlighted that it faces unusual challenges in student engagement given its geographically dispersed structure, its student profile and its blended learning delivery model. UHI's commitment to proactively seeking ways of overcoming these challenges in partnership with the student body is demonstrated by the Strategic Plan which has 'our students' as one of the three underpinning themes.

36   The University has a Student Engagement Manager whose role is to work with students, lead on student representation work, and to support staff engaging with students. The post-holder chairs the Student Engagement Group, comprising staff and students from all APs, which sends proposals to senior committees. A Student Engagement Plan was produced in 2016, which seeks to ensure that students feel part of a supportive institution, that they are engaged in their own learning and work with the University in shaping the direction of learning. These objectives are supported and facilitated by formal mechanisms of student representation on committees, participation in institutional reviews and involvement in the Highlands and Islands Student Association (HISA), AP student associations and in a range of other activities including the involvement of student representatives from across the academic partnership at HISA Higher Education Regional Committee, Regional Council and national events.

HISA

37   HISA was launched in June 2015 as a result of a two-year Scottish Government and SFC-funded project awarded to UHI to establish a new regional framework for student representation. This replaced the UHI Students' Association (UHISA) which was voluntarily dissolved in spring 2015. UHI provided extensive support for HISA in its first year of operation, including leading on the recruitment and training of its first permanent staff, and the election of the Depute Presidents based at the APs.

38   HISA is a tertiary student association representing the interests of further and higher education students, aiming to bring 'significantly enhanced cohesion across the UHI partnership'. The HISA President meets monthly with the UHI Principal to focus on high-level issues and with the Deputy Principal to progress plans at an executive level and maintain effective communication.

39   Despite HISA being in its early stages at the time of the current ELIR and, consequently, some students remaining unaware of its establishment, staff and students attested to its positive impact. The willingness of both UHI and HISA to work in partnership to allow 'two-way communication from classroom to Court' was clearly evident to the ELIR team.

Student Partnership Agreement

40   UHI was the first university to adopt a Student Partnership Agreement (SPA) in 2013, a formal agreement between the University and the student association. The SPA, which is renewed annually, sets out how students and staff will work together to improve the student experience. The SPA includes the general arrangements for engagement, including the ways in which an individual student can engage with the quality processes of the institution, and identifies three areas to be prioritised for development in each year. The first SPA identified three work streams: student health and well-being; assessment and feedback; and social integration. The ELIR team noted that UHI reported progress in all three areas.

41   The staff and students who met the ELIR team were largely unaware of the current SPA. The team was informed that it had been reviewed recently and the Student Engagement Group was working to place an emphasis on developing the tertiary nature of the SPA to include all students, with initial support and advice being sought from Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (sparqs). Senior staff acknowledged that there would be benefit in raising awareness of the SPA, indicating that UHI planned to relaunch it later in 2016 (see paragraph 82).

Student representation on committees

42   The ELIR team learned that UHI is employing a variety of approaches to improve engagement with committees, identifying the Student Engagement Group as a particularly useful forum for the exchange of effective strategies across the University. In 2013, in response to student feedback requesting further action to ensure the student voice was heard, the Student Engagement Group produced the Students on Committees Protocol as an induction resource for students. The students who met the ELIR team were not familiar with the Protocol, but the team heard that UHI intends the work stream in the SPA on student representation to result in improvements in this area. The team also learned that HISA has plans to undertake an audit of student representation.

43   The University Court and all of the UHI academic committees have student representation, as do relevant AP committees, Subject Network committees and QAEC. Class representatives operate through programme committees or staff/student liaison groups and there was evidence that, where these committees were in place, there was effective communication between staff and students. Students indicated that agendas, generally, were circulated in advance and that some committees were very responsive to student views.

44   There are two postgraduate research (PGR) student representatives on the Research Degrees Committee (RDC) and one on the Research Committee. These representatives all meet regularly with staff from the Graduate School to ensure that the PGR student voice is heard. In discussion with the ELIR team, PGR students indicated student engagement had improved considerably this year and attributed this to the increasing impact of HISA. They recognised that it could be challenging to engage research students who are highly committed to their own projects.

Subject Network Officers

45   Following the 2012 ELIR, UHI continued to develop the Subject Network Student Officer (SNSO) role. In 2014-15, five SNSOs were appointed and their remit reviewed and refined. These paid roles were intended to facilitate student engagement with strategic management and governance processes through the subject networks and strengthen communication between UHISA, the student body and University structures. UHI reported

that these posts attracted high calibre students who worked closely with the Subject Network Leaders. The SNSOs produced project reports drawing on student survey and focus group data. Topics included assessment feedback, library resources and transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study. The transition topic was submitted as a poster presentation at the 2015 QAA Enhancement Themes conference.

46   UHI acknowledged that it had not been possible for all Subject Networks to appoint an SNSO each year and, as a result, staff and students had varied understandings of the expectations of the role. UHI has worked with HISA to enhance and embed the role and to make it more visible. A role descriptor was developed and the name changed to Subject Network Officer, although the focus remains that of effective two-way communication at Subject Network level. HISA recruited three SNOs as paid posts in Semester 1 of 2015-16 and intended to run elections for the remaining posts in Semester 2. The ELIR team heard that the SNO role is now secure and visible. SNOs attend all of the Subject Network Committee meetings, participate in the HISA Higher Educational Regional Committee (HERC) and the HISA Regional Student Council, producing reports on developments in their Subject Network and on the higher education curriculum and quality enhancement.

Student surveys and feedback

47   UHI has reviewed its use of student surveys following the 2012 ELIR. In 2015, the University engaged with the National Student Survey (NSS) for the third time, achieving a response rate of 76 per cent. QAEC has responsibility for analysing the NSS outcomes and key priorities are extrapolated from the feedback. QAEC also monitors action plans to address areas of lower student satisfaction, prioritising those which fall below sector benchmarks.

48   The University took part in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) for the second time in 2015, with a 45 per cent response rate. Analysis and benchmarking of outcomes was undertaken by the RDC. RDC agreed an action plan in response to the issues identified, which is also reviewed by QAEC. The Head of PGR Student Development supports PGR student engagement in conjunction with PGR student representatives by providing a dedicated VLE space for PGR students and through the biennial staff/student research conference. UHI has committed to participation in the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) in 2016.

49   Student feedback is sought through module/course evaluations which inform annual monitoring self-evaluation documents (SEDs). Staff talked about the variety of student feedback mechanisms and interim and end-of-module feedback was cited as one of the most immediate ways of responding quickly to student feedback. In 2014-15, a standardised online module survey was piloted in 396 degree modules and Higher National units across a range of subject areas and levels. It gained a response rate of 27 per cent. Following further work to refine the data analysis and reporting tools, the survey was made available to all modules in 2015-16. The outcomes for Semester 1 2015-16 indicated that most students were broadly positive about their experience, with the most positive response relating to teaching staff being knowledgeable and enthusiastic (that 88 per cent agreed). Students were least positive in response to the learning environment, such as teaching rooms and technology meeting their needs. However, the response to wider resources including library and any e-resources being appropriate to the needs of the module rose by 12 per cent. The University noted that there was more variation in responses between Subject Networks than between APs.

50   Students who met the ELIR team reported that they were often unaware of the University's responses to their survey feedback. While UHI is anxious to avoid survey fatigue, it nevertheless seeks to produce 'rich local data' enabling internal benchmarking to

drive enhancement. The team heard that UHI is seeking to raise awareness of the actions taken in response to survey outcomes and other quality monitoring processes. The team noted that some data is published externally and many reports are available internally through committee papers and shared folders, but UHI acknowledged there is room for improvement in terms of the organisation and accessibility of this information. A surveys page has been created in the student support area of the UHI website informing students about the nature and number of surveys they will be asked to complete, what happens to the data and examples of the actions taken. Staff emphasised that HISA had already been effective in helping to raise awareness of this online student feedback resource. UHI is working with HISA to publicise these developments to students and is building on the 'you said, we listened' models, adopted by some APs. The University is encouraged to continue working to ensure students are aware of the ways in which their feedback is being listened to and acted upon (see paragraph 84).

Red Button

51   The 'Red Button' is a web-based tool providing an alternative mechanism for students to raise concerns or queries directly and anonymously, if they wish. It is widely promoted. Users are advised that the 'Red Button' is not intended to replace the standard feedback or complaints channels. All comments are read and followed up by the Dean of Students within three working days. Students who met the ELIR team reported that the service, which was identified as an area of positive practice in the 2012 ELIR, continued to be widely used and understood. In 2014-15, 122 enquiries were made to the Red Button, a slight increase on the previous year. A set of service standards is in place to manage user expectations and, following feedback from quality managers, quarterly reports are provided to APs and Subject Network Leaders and an annual report is circulated widely to staff and students. The annual report is also considered by QAEC, particularly with a view to identifying any common themes with NSS or other survey outcomes. The report summarises overall themes, with breakdown by Subject Network and AP, as well as providing anonymised summaries of each enquiry. UHI staff indicated that they plan to work with HISA to raise student awareness of the Red Button facility and have produced new marketing materials. The continuing value and effectiveness of the Red Button was highlighted to the ELIR team by staff and students. Students showed a clear understanding of the mechanism and there was evidence that a speedy response is received (see paragraph 84).

Student-led Teaching Awards

52   UHI adopted Student-led Teaching Awards in partnership with NUS (Scotland) in 2009-10. Students from across the partnership are invited to nominate staff for a variety of awards. A panel of students considers the nominations and results are determined by the quality of the nomination and evidence, rather than the number of nominations. The feedback from students provides a valuable insight into the student experience and award winners have presented at staff development events. Students who met the ELIR team were aware of these awards and were enthusiastic to ensure that good teaching and student support were acknowledged in this way.

Personal Academic Tutors

53   UHI described the Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) role as vital to the quality of the student experience and satisfaction. PATs provide personalised support for individual students and act as key contacts for those students who study off-campus. There are specified minimum levels of engagement with undergraduate and taught postgraduate students designed to ensure the parity of student experience. PATs provide an introductory meeting and a minimum of one academic advisory meeting each session. PATs signpost

students to specialist support and provide advice and guidance on a range of matters including University regulations, plagiarism and study support.

54   In 2014-15, a short-life working group was established to review the PAT role following student feedback suggesting variable implementation and understanding of the role across the partnership. This resulted in the production of A Personal Academic Tutor's Role and Remit, together with guidance notes for staff. UHI also reviewed the PAT staff resources and guides, as part of which the University identified the need to enhance the visibility and accessibility of these. The Educational Development Unit (EDU) was commissioned to create a self-directed online resource built from the existing text-based resources with additional content provided by the EDU. This is expected to make a notable impact in ensuring that there is consistency in the discharging of PAT duties. The ELIR team learned that there is no central monitoring of the PAT workload allocations across the partnership, although there is guidance on the number of tutees a PAT can have in any given semester. It was clear to the team that the role is well understood and valued. Staff also appreciated the guidance provided to support those in the role. Students who met the team were universally positive about the PAT role, highlighting that PATs frequently provide exceptional levels of support. Overall, the team considered the PAT role to be consistent, accessible, well embedded and positively evaluated by students across UHI, including students studying abroad.

Blended learning

55   UHI has adopted a blended learning approach to delivering the curriculum, with the 'blend' varying from fully online to completely face-to-face. UHI's approach to learning and teaching makes extensive use of videoconferencing (VC) and virtual learning environments (VLE). The blended learning approach was coordinated through the Curriculum for the 21st Century (C21C) project. C21C aimed to make as much of the curriculum available in as many locations as is academically and financially sustainable. It promotes equivalence of academic support for all students through a set of blended learning standards (see paragraph 100).

56   The use of VC has allowed students to access lectures and tutorials from their own desktops, although UHI recognises that this has not been without its challenges; for example, there have been instances where students have accessed activities as individuals but the pedagogy is based on the premise of students studying in a group. UHI is also aware of capacity and connectivity issues, several of which have been brought to the University's attention via the Red Button. In discussions with the ELIR team, students were generally positive about the use of technology but there was some criticism of the success of the VC and, in particular, the VLE. Most of the more critical comments related to the technology functioning as it should, including issues beyond the control of UHI, such as connections being affected by adverse weather or disrupted by wildlife. However, some criticisms related to lack of expertise by staff (see paragraphs 100 and 104).

Essential Student Skills

57   The EDU Essential Student Skills (ESS) Online Project aims to gather and refine existing learning resources to ensure that all students across the partnership have access to the same level of high quality provision, designed to support the entire student journey. Available through an online portal, each resource can be used as standalone or can be contextualised by staff for their own subjects. Students can also familiarise themselves with resources prior to enrolment at the University. Most of the programmes use a blended delivery format to prepare students for 'this new style of learning'. Twenty packages were created, three of which introduce students to the tools used for communication and collaboration in a blended learning setting and provide experience of learning online.

Students can access these resources in their own time and return to them as and when they wish. The resources have been well received by staff and students alike, with over 10,000 page views in its first month alone. The ESS project was the winner of the inaugural UHI Student Support Initiative award in 2015.

Library Services

58   Students have access to library services at their own AP, which cater for higher and further education students. Library services have undergone a number of reviews in the last three years in response to student feedback which highlighted lower satisfaction.

59   The Library Services Review, undertaken in May 2015, provided commendations and recommendations and the Review Coordinator, Chair of the Review Panel and Chair of QAEC met in May 2016 to report on progress with the recommendations. The University reported that the review had been successful in defining a strategy for future enhancement, in forging links between the Libraries Practitioner Group (LPG) and the Learning and Information Service and it strengthened the role of the LPG in evaluating and addressing the quality of provision. In discussions with the ELIR team, PGR students were positive about the Library services. The undergraduate students were less enthusiastic, although they did appreciate the online resources.

Student mentoring

60   The student mentor network provides training and a structure for more experienced students to share their knowledge and experience with those new to higher education. The mentor-mentee relationship is informal and students meet face-to-face, online or by email when they are based at different campuses. UHI acknowledged that it was proving difficult to find mentors and it was focusing additional efforts on promoting the benefits of the mentoring network.

61   Students who met the ELIR team indicated that they had a positive experience of the scheme with some students keeping in touch with the online mentoring group on social media. One AP, SAMS UHI, was reported as having a good mentoring scheme in place for postgraduate research students involved in teaching (see paragraph 67).

Postgraduate research students

62   PGR students confirmed that they have access to the full range of student support services provided by UHI and its APs, and also have their own dedicated services provided through the Graduate School.

63   Students who met the ELIR team were positive about the value of the UHI induction and about the information and support available for students and supervisors through the VLE and VC facilities. PGR students who met the ELIR team spoke positively about the Graduate School, confirming its success in maintaining close relationships with students wherever they are located. The team heard that a new post of Head of PGR Student Development had been established in 2013 to work with the Graduate School and APs to foster a close integration of PGR students into the life and work of their host departments and supervisors. Students who met the team were not explicitly aware of the Head role but they did acknowledge the existence of close-knit research communities supported by student networks, events and the use of social media and the VLE. Students were particularly enthusiastic about an instant messaging facility used at UHI for maintaining close contact between students and between students and staff.

64   At the time of the current ELIR, UHI PGR students were also associate students of the University of Aberdeen (see paragraph 113) and therefore had access to specific resources and services under the terms of the accreditation agreement in place between the two universities. In addition to research supervisors, each student is allocated a Third Party Monitor who is a member of academic staff independent of their supervisory team. The team heard that, while not all students contact their Third Party Monitors, those who had found them very responsive and the arrangement therefore provides useful additional support.

65   Training needs for PGR students are assessed on an individual basis with their supervisor through progress monitoring. The Graduate School covers travel and accommodation costs for face-to-face courses. VC delivery is also used to provide training and students are able to participate in external training opportunities.

66   The annual PGR conference, held at a different location each year and integrated with the biennial UHI Research Conference, was regarded by students as an important opportunity for engendering a sense of community. In discussions with the team, students indicated that they welcome more frequent opportunities to share experiences through conferences or similar events.

67   The 2012 ELIR identified that UHI should, as a matter of priority, ensure that postgraduate students who teach should receive training before undertaking the role. The current ELIR team learned that PGR students engaged in teaching were provided with guidance and training but it was not consistent and there was no mandatory scheme. UHI recognised that students have requested additional support for their teaching role, and this was echoed in the team's discussions with students during the current ELIR. The team heard that a pilot programme was being offered at one AP, SAMS UHI, where there are larger numbers of postgraduate research students. The University is asked to ensure that it introduces a consistent training programme so that all PGR students who teach receive training before they begin teaching and also receive ongoing support for their role (see paragraph 85).

Academic community

68   UHI recognises the challenges for its students in feeling part of a peer community, given the geographical spread of the University. UHI also emphasised that it wants all of its students to have a positive university experience, irrespective of where they are based.

69   All of the main campuses offer facilities for social interaction and some campuses have traditional student association buildings. UHI fosters a sense of belonging through the use of technology such as the VLE, social media, and newsletters including the University newsletter, The Network, which is produced monthly in term time and distributed to over 10,000 email addresses.

70   As an outcome of the 2013-14 Student Partnership Agreement, UHI collaborated with students to develop a Social Experience Policy, which aims to offer opportunities to develop interests and engender a sense of belonging to the University and support the formation of social relationships. In 2015-16, HISA funding was increased significantly to support social and extracurricular activity such as societies and clubs.

71   In discussions with the ELIR team, undergraduate and postgraduate (taught and research) students all spoke extremely positively about the success of the University's efforts in this regard, describing UHI as a 'fantastic community' (see paragraph 81). Related to this, students highlighted the care and sensitivity with which they were supported by PATs in a range of circumstances and PGR students spoke enthusiastically about the support that they received from their supervisors.

2.4 Approaches to promoting the development of graduate attributes, including employability

72   Overall, the University has an effective approach to promoting employability and graduate attributes, although there would be benefit in continuing work to raise the profile of the existing graduate attributes with staff and students.

73   The University is a recognised driver of employment and economic development in the region. The Strategic Plan identifies clear aspirations in relation to employability, with a critical performance indicator (CPI) based on DLHE outcomes for graduates. In 2013-14, 92 per cent of UHI graduates went on to work or study, slightly above the national benchmark. The University affirmed its commitment to increasing the employment options of students through the development and delivery of courses tailored to the needs of employers, offering increased opportunities for placement experience, the introduction of a new Skills and Employability Award and other employer engagement initiatives.

74   The Careers and Employability Centre (CEC) provides support for careers and placement services across the partnership as well as a range of events such as employability week. A range of career management sheets have been developed and an annual seminar programme is delivered by VC which was shortlisted for an Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services Award in 2013. In addition there is a significant online resource and e-guidance support for those students who are unable to attend an AP, or where the AP does not have specialist careers staff available.

75   The strategy for employer engagement, branded as UHI Work and Enterprise, is intended to explicitly complement AP employer networks. The University indicated that its emphasis to date has been to concentrate on a small number of key employers. It is intended that future work strands will focus on closer integration with the CEC, curriculum development and design, for example to extend and embed entrepreneurship and other employability skills, and increasing placement or other experiential learning opportunities.

76   Undergraduate students who had used the CEC reported a mixed response to the ELIR team, although PGR students provided positive feedback on their experience of the service. The team noted that the NSS indicates a lower than benchmark satisfaction with advice on career choices.

77   The Student Placement Policy and guidance had been reviewed recently at the time of the current ELIR, articulating the respective responsibilities of students and employers, and the EDU was working on a project to provide related online support materials for students and staff. The ELIR team learned that not all students have placement opportunities and, in discussion, some staff were unclear about the content of the Student Placement Policy. However, students who had been on placements indicated that the arrangements and supervision were good and they attested to the online support provided through the VLE.

Graduate Attributes

78   The original UHI graduate attributes were developed in 2010 in response to the Graduates for the 21st Century national Enhancement Theme with 5 'core values' identified for both staff and students. In 2013, UHI commissioned a research project on embedding the graduate attributes as part of its engagement with the Developing and Supporting the Curriculum Enhancement Theme. This research concluded that students and employers generally valued the UHI graduate attributes but also identified several areas for development. In 2014, following consultation with students and employers about the

relevance and currency of the graduate attributes, QAEC convened a working group to review them. At the time of the current ELIR, the new graduate attributes had not been formally adopted but the version produced by the working group comprised: Community and Awareness; Self-Management; Knowledge and Academic Skills; Communication; Interpersonal Skills. These were mapped against those defined nationally by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and QAA, while making them relevant to UHI students and meaningful at SCQF Levels 7-12.

79   The Working Group made a number of recommendations to QAEC including the need for clarification and revision of the attributes to have greater coverage, in particular of employability skills, personal and social development and academic skills. The ELIR team also learned that the University plans to work with CEC to progress the Working Group's recommendations. In addition, one of UHI's research projects for the current Student Transitions Enhancement Theme – Transition to Employment – builds on earlier work and aims to test and gain feedback on the graduate attributes as a framework for identifying, measuring and monitoring transferable skills development.

80   Not all of the staff who met the ELIR team were aware of the UHI graduate attributes, but some reported that they talked to final year students about skills including interview techniques and CV production, while other staff confirmed that graduate attributes were introduced to their students from the beginning of their studies. Some staff indicated that graduate attributes were mapped during the programme approval process where reference to graduate skills is required as part of the approval template (see paragraph 109), but such a mapping was not evident to the team from the documentation it was able to review. Staff were aware that work was ongoing to promote awareness of the graduate attributes and the team concurred that increasing the visibility of the attributes to both staff and students would be useful (see paragraph 85).

2.5   Effectiveness of the approach to enhancing the student learning experience

81   UHI aims to be an inclusive, student-centred institution, offering a positive learning experience to all. The ELIR team concluded that the University has been successful in fostering a strong sense of belonging and community among its students. Working with its geographically distributed nature, it has successfully managed to adapt to the diverse local environments of its constituent APs, while also engendering a sense of community across the whole University.

82   UHI was the first university to adopt a Student Partnership Agreement (SPA) and has achieved some success as a result of previous SPAs. The University acknowledges that awareness among staff and students of the current SPA could be better. UHI is, therefore, encouraged to build on the positive relationship already established between the University and the HISA to realise the benefits of capturing and progressing joint work through an SPA.

83   The University has a proactive and multi-faceted approach to widening access including continued support once students are admitted. A range of activities are adopted in the University's practice including use of contextualised admissions, extensive and effective use of RPL, and active networks with schools and colleges. Support after admission is provided through the PATs and programme leaders. The University is encouraged to build on the existing positive activity it is undertaking to develop an institution-wide, strategic approach to address the challenges of non-continuation.

84   UHI is mindful of the challenges in ensuring a consistent approach and equivalence of student experience across all groups and locations. It has robust mechanisms in place to

achieve consistency, including the practitioner groups, student surveys and other feedback tools and the development of accessible support and guidance for all staff and students. PATs are central to the equability of student experience and the PAT system is well embedded, effective and positively evaluated by students across UHI including students studying abroad. Both undergraduate and postgraduate students reported having a positive experience. Postgraduate research students are well supported in their APs and through the UHI Graduate School, and acknowledged the quality of supervision provided by the University. The Red Button device continues to provide a valuable mechanism for students to give feedback directly to the UHI Executive Office and to receive a rapid response. In terms of responses to routine feedback opportunities, there would be value in the University continuing to work with students to ensure they are aware of the ways in which their feedback is being listened to and acted upon.

85   The University works closely with employers in a range of industry sectors and aims to offer highly vocationally-relevant curricula across all levels. UHI plans to carry out further work to ensure its graduate attributes achieve their intended objectives and are visible for programme staff and students. In relation to postgraduate research students who teach, UHI should develop the pilot arrangements that are in place in at least one AP to ensure that all students who teach are trained and supported to carry out the role.

3   Enhancement in learning and teaching

3.1   Approaches to identifying and sharing good practice

86   The University emphasises that its geographical distribution and the composition of its student population have a significant impact on its approach to enhancing learning and teaching. The priority given to providing opportunities and incentives for staff to engage in scholarship is emphasised by their inclusion in the Strategic Plan (see paragraph 7).

87   The 2012 ELIR report noted that the University's approach to enhancing learning and teaching was an area of positive practice. Since then, UHI has continued to develop its approach and arrangements for identifying and sharing good practice. Some of these are well developed and working effectively, while others are in a more formative stage.

88   The Learning and Teaching Academy (LTA) was established following the 2012 ELIR, in part to address some of the areas identified for development relating to supporting staff development and sharing good practice. The LTA has multiple roles but, in relation to sharing good practice, it acts as a focal point and a source of shared expertise. The LTA engages directly with the Academic Partners (APs) and practitioner and subject groups to identify good practice, and supports the dissemination and further development of good practice through activities including workshops, seminars and digital scholarship. Workshops and seminars are offered directly through the LTA and are also facilitated on a tailored basis for APs.

89   A principal element of the LTA's programme is the coordination of £100,000 of staff development funding. This money supports sabbaticals, scholarships and professional development activities for staff and is an important component in the promotion of the enhancement of learning and teaching. It was clear from the ELIR team's discussions with academic staff that this purpose was being achieved and that staff had participated in successful workshops.

90   A further key strategic initiative led by LTA has been the development of the Accredited Learning Professional Development and Innovation in Education (ALPINE) Framework. The Framework, developed in 2015-16, has been approved by Higher

Education Academy (HEA) and will enable the University to award Fellowships of the HEA. Full implementation of the Framework was scheduled for 2016-17.

91   A further effective mechanism for identifying and sharing good practice is through the annual quality monitoring process, specifically through the self-evaluation documents (SEDs). The structure of the SED, and the process by which it feeds into the Quality Monitoring Group, then through to QAEC through the relevant Subject Network and Academic Partner dialogues facilitates the identification and sharing of good practice. In addition, LTA engages with these groups, enabling it to learn about the good practice that is taking place and to disseminate relevant examples.

3.2   Impact of the national Enhancement Themes and related activity

92   The University indicated in its RA that it has engaged fully with the national Enhancement Themes and the ELIR team would concur with that view. In discussions with staff, the team was frequently told of the work being undertaken on the current Student Transitions Theme and it was clear that the focus of the chosen programme of work was relevant and impacting positively on teaching and learning. The University has elected to focus on the following areas: the implications and impact of the Curriculum for Excellence on HE and FE learning and teaching; the transition from Higher National to degree study; the transition from university to employment.

93   A further outcome of the initial work on the Theme was the production of a good practice vignette and an online module. Funding from the HEA Pedagogies for Transitions fund has enabled an articulation/transition network for Creative Industries to be established. The University has also made a significant contribution nationally through six presentations at the QAA International Enhancement Themes Conference in June 2015. In addition, the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Business held a two-day 'Enhancefest' conference at one of the APs and a further Student Transitions event was being planned. The team also learned that research-based outcomes from the Student Transitions Theme would be disseminated through the University's involvement in co-editing an edition of the Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice.

94   The University has used previous Enhancement Themes to bring about significant changes in the way that it delivers teaching and learning. The Developing and Supporting the Curriculum (DSC) Theme, which prompted the UHI Curriculum for 21st Century (C21C) initiative, led to a number of significant changes across the University. In order to maintain and sustain ongoing curriculum development, the LTA was established. The C21C project led to significant curriculum reform. The process has resulted in a more cohesive and interrelated curriculum where modules may be incorporated in multiple programmes. Other outcomes included: reapproving all degree programmes; moving from a 15 credit to a 20 credit framework; adding in credit-bearing placement modules as preparation for work; establishing new module leadership processes; implementing online enrolment; two LTA-commissioned research projects; and the establishment of the PAT role. UHI emphasised that, while C21C had been successful in many respects, it had been a top-down initiative and the University considered a learning point from this experience was that good practice was more likely to be shared successfully and become embedded when it was contextualised and adopted through a practitioner-led approach. These were the approaches the University was seeking to promote through the LTA and the ALPINE Framework.

3.3   Engaging and supporting staff

95   The University has an effective approach to engaging and supporting staff. It is meeting the challenges of its geographical spread and student and staff populations through its commitment to blended, online and flexible delivery of its teaching and learning programme.

96   The 2012 ELIR report noted that the technology-based approach of the University to learning and teaching through videoconferencing and flexible and blended delivery strategies required UHI to 'develop additional ways of assuring the quality and the consistency of the virtual learning environment' and that 'this should include providing staff development to support the use of technology by all staff'. The LTA's role in association with the EDU and the role of the Head of Academic Development are important in meeting these goals.

97   The EDU offers great flexibility in enabling staff to meet a diverse range of curriculum needs from the development of 'taster courses' to the production of high quality learning resources. It was clear from the ELIR team's discussions with academic staff and students that the EDU produced highly useful resources and also provided professional development which enabled staff to become more technologically able and independent. EDU staff have been embedded in some of the APs which ensures that the EDU resource is readily accessible to a large proportion of the academic staff. Nonetheless, the work of EDU is evident across all of the APs and curriculum areas through the range of projects it carried out and the workshops it facilitates. The approach to applying for EDU support for curriculum-based initiatives is well known and the allocation of resources is directly linked to the UHI strategic objectives.

98   The ELIR team noted that the EDU has established itself on the national stage through a range of funded projects. These include generating a standard system of unit costs for the transformation of traditional learning materials to online and blended forms, evaluating the potential for universities to act as publishers of electronic books and learning materials and having won a Herald newspaper Higher Education award in 2016.

99   The use of technology to deliver teaching and learning programmes and in providing support is ubiquitous across the University. The virtual learning environment (VLE) and videoconferencing (VC) technology are widely used, are largely stable (see paragraph 56) and, the ELIR team was told by students and staff, are integral to learning and teaching. The VC system is largely automated and the 24/7 support for students (and staff) using the technology is regarded very positively by students and staff alike. The team heard that responses from the Help Desk were extremely prompt at all times. It was evident that the staff and students who met the team were comfortable with the technology, allowing the technology to become 'invisible' during the ELIR visit. The EDU has developed an excellent 'Essential Student Skills' module which provides training and support for students using the technology (see paragraph 57).

100   Underpinning the use of technology is a comprehensive set of Blended Learning Standards. These Standards are robust and scholarly and are seen as leading edge internationally, as indicated by the awards received and the interest shown by a range of international institutions. It was clear from the ELIR team's discussions with staff that the Blended Learning Standards were of great value in developing their 'blended approaches' to teaching. It was noted that all new programmes are reviewed by the Head of Academic Development with respect to appropriate use of technology and to ensure that the programmes align with the Blended Learning Standards. In line with this approach, all modules developed by the EDU meet the Blended Learning Standards. However, not all modules offered across UHI have been developed in accordance with the Blended Learning

Standards. In part this is being addressed through the review process and the role the Head of Academic Development plays. However, there would be benefit in UHI expediting the implementation of the Standards across the curriculum. In spite of the positive work of the EDU and LTA, the University has recognised that there are still areas of resistance, or at least marginal uptake or ineffective use of the technology. Staff who met the team indicated that initiatives are underway to widen the uptake of effective blended learning delivery, and there would be value in the University continuing to give this attention.

101 The ELIR team noted that the relationship between the LTA, EDU and Academic Development was collegial and the three units worked closely and cooperatively, reporting to the same senior manager. The University indicated that there was an intention to bring LTA and EDU together with a shared purpose and this has subsequently led to the two units being co-located. Given the ongoing development of the LTA and the expanding roles of both organisations, it is important to ensure that there continues to be effective coordination between the three units.

102 The ELIR team noted that there is a strong commitment to the professional development review (PDR) process. Staff members undertake review interviews with their line managers, and senior managers know these have taken place through a rigorous documentation process. The basic principles of the PDR system have been agreed by the HR Practitioners group whose view, the ELIR team learned, is that each AP should have its own process and identify its own priorities. Priorities are brought together by the Head of Academic Development through the Staff Development Practitioners Group. However, the team also learned that addressing University-wide development goals and objectives is potentially challenging because there is no overarching academic development policy or strategy to provide coordinated, equitable access to staff development opportunities focused on UHI priorities. The team heard that professional development was a 'shared responsibility' and that there was an implicit 'framework' that enabled staff to access appropriate academic development. There would be benefit in UHI developing an institutional staff development policy to secure alignment of development opportunities with institutional strategic priorities. The LTA has identified the need for greater alignment of professional development activities with institutional strategy, and the need for a more coherent and coordinated approach among the APs to the provision of professional development activities. In order to secure the effective implementation of the ALPINE Framework, it will be particularly important that academic staff have the time and resources to commit to the programme. UHI is therefore encouraged to develop an institutional staff development policy to secure alignment of development opportunities with institutional strategic priorities (see paragraph 105). Related to this, the ELIR team formed the view that, while there are time allocations related to a number of key institutional roles, there would be value in the University giving consideration to developing more explicit and overarching guidelines for workload allocation.

103 The 2012 ELIR identified a need to continue seeking ways of providing staff with opportunities to develop their scholarly activities. An integral element to this is the establishment of research-teaching linkages and the University highlighted that the LTA was working with the Research Office to develop a shared understanding and examples to illustrate these linkages. The ELIR team noted that there had been a recent workshop facilitated by the LTA on this topic which had been well received and the team would encourage UHI to continue to ensure that this important dimension is addressed.

3.4 Effectiveness of the approach to promoting good practice in learning and teaching

104   UHI has an effective approach to promoting good practice in learning and teaching. In particular, the EDU provides a high quality service for the development of online resources and comprehensive range of training to support staff in delivering online teaching. The EDU has also developed a set of blended learning standards which are scholarly and represent particularly good practice. They have been used to inform the development of new programmes and there would be benefit in the University introducing the standards across all of its provision.

105   In order to support greater alignment of professional development activities with institutional strategy, and to secure a more coherent and coordinated approach among the APs to the provision of professional development activities, the University is asked to develop an overarching staff development policy in support of delivering institutional strategies.

4   Academic standards

4.1   Approach to setting, maintaining and reviewing academic standards

106   UHI has a secure approach to setting, maintaining and reviewing academic standards. The University's overall approach to academic standards is summarised in its Academic Standards and Quality Regulations (ASQR) which articulate UHI's commitment to: designing appropriate and relevant programmes that are informed by national benchmarks, and which are systematically reviewed and updated; monitoring and maintaining the consistency of academic standards across the University; developing academic staff to ensure they have appropriate qualifications and experience to deliver the programmes successfully; and to ensuring that its quality assurance systems and processes are clear, effective and well embedded.

107   The Academic Council (AC) has formal responsibility for the oversight of the academic standards of the University's awards, and all regulatory changes require AC approval. AC is chaired by the Principal and has a widely representative composition determined by the University Court to including senior management, students, and professorial, teaching, research and support staff. The Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC) reports to AC, and receives direct reports from a range of bodies including the two faculty boards of study, the Research Degrees Committee, the Partnership Planning Forum (which additionally reports to the Higher Education Partnership, Planning and Resources Committee), and various practitioner working groups. QAEC's terms of reference are extensive and indicate that it is primarily responsible for ensuring compliance with the University's quality assurance policies and regulations. QAEC is chaired by the Deputy Principal and its membership includes the Academic Registrar, the relevant vice principals, deans, two AP quality managers and a student representative.

108   The ASQR are reviewed annually and are accessible on the website. They provide a comprehensive and clear compendium of information on the University's principles of quality assurance, the roles of academic leaders and the arrangements for key quality processes such as curriculum development, approval, review and the external examiner process. In April 2015, the University established an ad hoc working group to revise the format of the ASQR with a view to producing two separate reference sets from 2016-17. The Academic Principles and Regulations, which are unlikely to be amended frequently, will be available in print and electronic forms and will include a statement of key principles, University awards, admission, assessment, progression and award, appeals, and academic

misconduct. This will signpost the second set which will include relevant policies, procedures, guidance and pro forma which will be available electronically on the quality framework webpages. The University anticipates that the new arrangements will be more student and staff user friendly, and enable minor updates and corrections to be made more speedily. In discussions with the ELIR team, some staff indicated that they found the existing ASQR helpful, and others welcomed the decision to separate the regulatory framework from guidance.

Programme approval and modification

109   Programme approval has three stages: initiation and planning approval, development, and formal approval. Proposals are considered initially by the relevant subject network and the quality committee of the appropriate AP as part of the completion of an AD1 form for University programmes, or an AP1 form for SQA programmes, ahead of formal consideration by the relevant faculty board of study (FBS). The FBS requires to be satisfied that the proposal is in line with faculty and University strategy; meets the needs of prospective students, employers and the wider community; makes effective use of resources; and presents a compelling business case. FBS will indicate whether or not any additional resources that are required to support delivery can be obtained. Faculty approved proposals are then considered by the Partnership Planning Forum (PPF) for UHI-wide discussion, with an outcome to proceed reported in the PPF minutes to AC. If the proposal is approved, FBS will appoint an advisory group, normally chaired by a Subject Network Leader (as nominated by the relevant dean) and including a representative from an AP, a member of another faculty, an expert in learning and teaching and an external appointee. The advisory group works with the development team in preparing the proposal for formal consideration by an approval panel, comprising a chair and including a different external subject specialist and two members (one of whom will be a quality assurance representative) normally from APs not involved with the proposal. Recommendations from the approval panel, which meets with the development team and considers both the module descriptors and programme specification are considered by FBS and reported to the AC.

110   The ELIR team noted the high levels of detail supplied in the programme and module approval documents together with the comprehensive reports of the advisory groups and approval panels and the significant external engagement involved. Staff who met the ELIR team were fully aware of the formal approval processes and familiar with the documentation. The team noted that the arrangements for approving modifications to programmes depend on the level of risk (low, medium, high), with those presenting the highest risk requiring AC approval.

Periodic subject and service review

111   All degree programmes and schemes are subject to reapproval, normally after a period of four years, after which reapproval is required only in exceptional circumstances. Thereafter, regular reviews of programmes are carried out as part of the subject review process which provides an opportunity for detailed reflection on how the requirements and standards of all subject network (SN) awards are managed and maintained. The scope of subject review includes all higher education provision within an SN, including collaborative and overseas provision, and is normally carried out on a six-year cycle, currently projected to 2021-22. Reviews are undertaken by a panel, including two external specialists, two internal members and a student member, which considers a self-evaluation document prepared by the SN team. The review panel engages in discussions with subject staff, students and relevant employers. The ELIR team noted the thoroughness of the SN review reports, and the extensive composition of the panels, which are chaired by a dean and include at least two external specialists, a student and staff not associated with the subject network. The panel reports conclude with commendations, recommendations and requirements, the latter

two being addressed to the SN, the University as a whole or both. These are considered by QAEC which, in turn, reports the outcome of the review to AC. The SN makes a formal response to QAEC on actions taken in response to the report within a year of the review.

112   At the time of the current ELIR, the University was developing a programme of student-facing service reviews, the Information and Communication Technologies review was scheduled for May 2017, following the completion of the Library Review in 2015 (see paragraph 59). Rather than preparing a long-term schedule for such reviews, the University intends to prioritise service reviews on the basis of student feedback, with the intention of reviewing all services over time.

Research postgraduate programmes

113   The University's current postgraduate research (PGR) regulations closely follow those of the University of Aberdeen with which UHI currently has an Accreditation Agreement relating to research degree programmes (RDP). UHI is able to offer RDPs jointly with other organisations, with the agreement of the University of Aberdeen. The UHI PGR regulations had been approved by AC for adoption following the formal outcome from the research degree awarding powers scrutiny being confirmed (see paragraph 2). UHI was most recently reaccredited by the University of Aberdeen in May 2014 when the accreditation panel concluded that UHI demonstrated robust policy, procedures and practices relating to its research staff and students and had evidenced good practice in its quality assurance and enhancement of standards and the student experience.

Documentation to support quality processes

114   The handbooks and materials that support the University's quality processes are clear and comprehensive. Key documents that support the University in ensuring that its approach to securing academic standards is well-informed and applied consistently include the AQSR (see paragraphs 108 and 125), the Postgraduate Code of Practice for Students and Supervisors, the Guide to External Examiners (see paragraphs 119 and 120) and the Collaborations Handbook (see paragraph 148). Although the format of the ASQR will, in future, be changed (see paragraph 108), it is comprehensive, clear and readily accessible to staff and was a key reference document for all involved in the University's quality assurance arrangements. The Postgraduate Code of Practice was familiar to postgraduate research students and supervisors, and includes succinct and clear explanations, arrangements and guidelines on such matters as postgraduate admissions, registrations, support, University systems, supervision, progression, thesis submission, appeals and complaints. This Code and the Postgraduate Research Regulations together provide a comprehensive, easily understood and accessible reference source for students and staff. The Guide to External Examiners is an equally clear and comprehensive handbook providing regulations and guidance on the roles of external examiners, the University's arrangements for their nomination and deployment, and the functions of various University committees for considering examiner reports and responses.

4.2   Management of assessment

Approach to assessment

115   UHI does not have an explicit institution-wide assessment strategy, although programme assessment strategies are considered as part of the programme approval arrangements (see paragraph 109). The University's former Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy 2012-14 recognised that assessment policy and practice are key to student learning. The Strategy also identified the need to develop an assessment framework and this formed the basis for the identification of a number of draft learning and teaching

precepts which are informing the introduction of a revised Learning and Teaching Strategy due to be introduced for 2016-17.

116   AC approved an assessment, feedback and feedforward policy in March 2014 and this, together with the related guidance notes, outlines requirements for staff to provide information on coursework assessments, submission deadlines and return dates at the beginning of the unit/module. Details of the assessment criteria and the assessment format must be presented in the programme handbook, in unit/module materials and/or workbooks as appropriate. Students who met the ELIR team confirmed their understanding of their module marking scheme and the meaning of grades, although there appeared to be variable practice in the timing of sharing information on the assignment requirements and submission dates. For taught postgraduate programmes, the University uses a standard detailed criterion-referenced marking grid, providing comprehensive information on the requirements to achieve grades at 10 per cent intervals and a similar, though less detailed, grid-referencing criteria for fail, pass, merit and distinction grades for the e-Portfolio element of the Skills and Employability Award. However, marking criteria for taught undergraduate programmes usually relate to the module, do not always appear in programme handbooks and vary in detail. The University is encouraged to introduce an institution-wide, detailed criterion-referenced grading scheme for its undergraduate degree programmes (see paragraph 125).

117   In the ASQR, the University clearly and succinctly describes its assessment regulations for UHI programmes and awards and those of SQA and other organisations. University regulations prescribe percentage and letter grades for marking, specify penalties for late submission and offer word count guidance for assignments at each of Levels 7 to 11 with related guidance on penalties in the event of submissions either not meeting or exceeding these. Teaching staff and students who met the ELIR team clearly applied and understood these protocols.

118   The ASQR specify that assignments are usually submitted and returned electronically. Assignments should be returned, normally, no later than 15 working days after the submission date and using a feedback pro forma, although the ELIR team noted that return dates do not appear to be monitored formally. While a number of the students who met the team indicated that this target was often met, there was some variability, and results from the 2014-15 student feedback indicated low levels of satisfaction with feedback. Staff reported that some students used the Red Button to complain if assignments were not returned on time. Students indicated that they generally found the feedback they received helpful, although the value of the feedforward guidance for subsequent work was less clear if assignments were returned late. The University is encouraged to introduce arrangements for monitoring the return of assignments to achieve greater consistency.

External examiners

119   External examiners are selected and appointed in line with the guidance in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code). They are appointed normally for four years to comment and report on all assessments that contribute to a University award. External examiners submit reports to the relevant faculty on separate pro forma for Tier 1 and Tier 2 assessment boards for consideration within SNs and by programme committees prior to formal consideration at faculty executive level. The pro forma require comments on academic standards in relation to external reference points, the assessment process, the comparability of academic standards and student achievement with UK HEIs, good practice and innovation in learning, teaching and assessment, and opportunities to enhance students' learning experiences. The responsibilities for considering the reports and signing-off responses to external examiners are clearly explained. AC receives an annual analysis of all external examiner reports to enable it to consider recurrent and/or institution-wide issues.

The annual analysis of the 2014-15 reports, prepared by the Academic Registrar and considered by QAEC and AC, noted that these were carefully and thoroughly reviewed within SN committees, programmes and faculties. The analysis also indicated positive comments on academic standards and illustrated examples of good practice which were reflected in a number of the reports. The analysis summarised areas for development and monitoring, and highlighted three specific programme-based potential concerns, together with the responses from the relevant faculty to the individual external examiners.

120   The Guide to External Examiners states that the University provides information on the name, position and employer of the programme external examiners in student handbooks and the ELIR team noted evidence of this. Although there is student membership of SNs, programme committees and faculty boards, none of the student representatives who met the ELIR team were aware of the roles and identities of external examiners and none were aware of having seen an external examiner's report. Senior staff indicated that, following discussions with students some years ago, the University had concluded that it would be unhelpful to students to make the reports readily available, given the complexity of the modular structure and the numbers of external examiners involved in programmes. Although the ASQR states that copies of the reports may be made available to students on request, the team considered that there would be benefit to students in having regular access to external examiner reports to provide further reassurance on the academic standards of their awards and an additional insight into features of their programme. This would also bring UHI into line with the relevant indicator of the Quality Code (see paragraphs 122 and 135).

Postgraduate research assessment

121   PGR students who met the ELIR team were aware of the progression requirements explained in the comprehensive Postgraduate Code of Practice for Students and Research Supervisors. The Research Degrees Committee approves the appointment of normally one internal and one external examiner for PGR programmes, nominated by the director of studies. The team noted that an additional external examiner is appointed if the candidate is a member of UHI staff.

4.3   Use of external reference points in managing academic standards

122   The University uses a range of benchmarks in its management of academic standards. ASQR makes frequent reference to the SCQF and the Quality Code including Subject Benchmark Statements, published by QAA. Documentation relating to key quality processes reviewed by the ELIR team confirmed these reference points are used in practice. Staff who met the team explained that reference to the SCQF and the Quality Code were included in induction programmes for new staff with SNs considering revised Subject Benchmark Statements as they appeared. Guidance on the programme development and approvals processes (see paragraph 109) signpost these.

123   The University seeks a range of external engagement. In addition to external examiners, UHI ensures that up to two external experts are members of programme advisory groups and approval panels (see paragraph 109) and contribute as specialists to subject review panels (see paragraph 111). Liaison with employers and industry bodies is a regular feature of the interaction between the University and its external community. A number of the University's programmes are accredited by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) and recognition from the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) for the delivery of initial teacher education underpins a range of Professional Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programmes.

124   UHI is a single centre for all SQA higher education provision in the region, with UHI SQA students registered at this single centre. The University holds maximum devolved powers from SQA which sets the learning outcomes and academic standards for SQA awards. UHI's processes for academic standards apply to all of its SQA provision, in addition to the SQA external verification procedures required and administered by SQA which culminate in an external verification report. The 2015 report confirmed UHI's arrangements for meeting SQA assessment and verification standards. The University has recently mapped its own systems against the revised 2015-18 SQA systems verification criteria, indicating that it will keep these under review and noting the increasing congruence between the two systems.

4.4   Effectiveness of the arrangements for securing academic standards

125   UHI has effective arrangements for securing and maintaining academic standards. Its arrangements are explained clearly and staff are well informed on these, supported by clear and comprehensive handbooks and related materials. The processes for programme development, approval and review are comprehensive and add value. In relation to assessment, while the arrangements are generally effective, there would be value in the University developing its approach by monitoring assignment turnaround times and introducing a criterion-referenced grading system for all undergraduate programmes.

126   Externality is secured by a detailed understanding and application of relevant external reference points and through the rigorous deployment of external specialists in the programme planning, approval and review activities and through external examiners' effective participation in the student assessment processes. Student understanding of the external examiner role would be enhanced by making the examiners' reports available on a regular basis, as indicated in the Quality Code.

5   Self-evaluation and management of information

5.1   Key features of the institution's approach

127   The University has an effective approach to self-evaluation and the management of information. Comprehensive procedures are in place for the monitoring and evaluation of activities at all levels of the institution, including the consideration of management information. These procedures are widely understood by staff.

128   In its Academic Standards and Quality Regulations 2015-16, the University commits itself to supporting self-evaluation and the quality processes in place seek to develop a reflective, open and analytical approach which identifies strengths and weaknesses and plans for improvement. Annual self-evaluation documents (SEDs) are completed at module, programme, subject network, and AP level. These include reflection on the actions taken in the preceding academic year and key actions planned for the following year.

129   Subject network (SN) SEDs form the basis for discussion at a series of annual dialogues where the Quality Monitoring Group (QMG) meets with representative groups for each SN to agree targets and objectives for the next 12 months. An outcome report is produced for each SN dialogue. A dialogue with APs also takes place annually. AP SEDs and the outcomes from the SN dialogues are discussed at the Subject Network Leaders/Quality Managers (SNLQM) Forum which comprises members of QMG, AP Quality Managers and Subject Network Leaders. Priority issues for further action are agreed which are monitored by QAEC. Staff informed the ELIR team that the annual monitoring dialogues help identify both strategic and operational cross-institutional themes, and that issues identified are analysed in depth in breakout groups.

130   A series of measures have been taken aimed at improving the annual quality monitoring process. In response to the ELIR 2012 report, from 2013-14 module SEDs include a table of key planned actions. Having previously been piloted, a standardised online module evaluation survey, focused on the enhancement of learning and teaching, was made available to all modules from 2015-16. This replaced multiple module and programme-level surveys and is intended to improve UHI's capacity to gather student feedback at a detailed level. Beginning in 2015-16, module and programme SEDs include progress reports on actions identified in the previous SED. From 2014-15, the format of the AP annual monitoring report reverted to an SED pro forma in order to foster consistency of reporting style and depth. The relationship between SN and AP dialogues was refined; these no longer run in parallel but instead are staggered so that an agreed agenda for action and enhancement can be identified.

131   The University stated that subject review and student support services review (see paragraphs 111 & 112) will be most effective if they are aligned with the annual quality processes. Accordingly, the annual SN SEDs contribute to the periodic subject review documentation. Similarly, themes emerging from the annual SN QMG dialogues and from the SNLQM Forum would, where relevant, be included in subject review documentation.

132   The University acknowledged the need for robust KPI data in its annual quality monitoring processes and stated that this had been the subject of continual enhancement over recent years. The definition and threshold levels of KPIs having been approved through consultation with QAEC, the Student Data Reporting Group reviewed the reporting functionality of the student records system with a view to streamlining KPI reporting and enabling more effective monitoring. A standard minimum dataset of KPIs relating to retention, progression, achievement and student population profile, including equalities data, was agreed for inclusion in annual monitoring SEDs. A KPI report format with improved visual presentation was developed which displays three-year trend data to support staff in monitoring KPIs at all levels and evaluating the impact of enhancement initiatives. 'Dashboard' style reports also are available to facilitate live monitoring of areas such as applications and enrolments against agreed targets. SED pro forma were amended in 2015-16 in order to strengthen consistent analysis of KPI data. Staff confirmed that a range of core reports is available and that the use of KPIs is embedded in annual monitoring at all levels. Moreover, bespoke reports are available if required.

133   The University anticipates that the various developments pertaining to management information should mean that, at an institutional level, datasets from NSS, PRES and module evaluations will be more effectively analysed and triangulated with KPIs to inform enhancement activity. Furthermore, the increasingly consistent analysis of KPI data should in due course facilitate a strong connection with the Strategic Plan CPIs and thereby ensure a cohesive and consistent approach where priorities for action are clearly identified. Overall, staff who met the ELIR team were very positive about the quantity and quality of information provided.

5.2   Commentary on the advance information set

134   UHI provided an extensive advance information set which, together with the Reflective Analysis and its appendices, afforded the ELIR team a good understanding of the University's quality assurance and enhancement processes. From its consideration of the advance information set and related documentation, the team identified a number of themes for further exploration.

135   Most of the documents contained in the advance information set were produced as part of UHI's normal cycle of monitoring and review. However, the mapping to the Quality Code was presented in a bespoke summary paper. The summary paper stated that the

Quality Code is a key reference point and this was clear from the range of documentation considered by the team. A systematic approach to mapping had been taken: as new guidance was published, the appropriate individual or group was requested to map the content against current policies and procedures, and report back to QAEC on action taken and recommendations for change. As a result, the Quality Code is explicitly signposted and referenced in the University's policies, regulations and procedures. In spite of this, the University is asked to 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 (see paragraph 145).

5.3 Use of external reference points in self-evaluation

136   The University makes use of a range of external reference points and meets sector expectations in the manner in which it employs these in its evaluative processes. The Academic Standards and Quality Regulations 2015-16 commit the University to designing programmes that are informed by national benchmarks. Consequently, the quality assurance systems are designed to engage with national standards and expectations, including the Quality Code (see paragraph 122).

137   The University stated that throughout its development it had sought to learn from other organisations in order to enhance the student experience; for example, it consulted with other higher education institutions when developing the methodology for its student support service review process. In discussion with senior staff, the ELIR team heard that development of the CPIs contained in the Strategic Vision and Plan 2015-20 had been informed by external benchmarks.

5.4 Management of public information

138   The University has an effective approach to the management of public information.

139   Most public information is published on the University website, which is overseen by the Marketing and Communications team and the central web team. The University website and 10 AP websites are on the same platform, sharing a common design and technology framework. Three specialist APs retain their own web presence.

140   The higher education course database has a single set of data, programme information being generated from the documentation produced through the programme approval process. All programme information published on the website is driven from the student records database system, run on a four-weekly cycle to deal with the updating, adding, and removal of programmes. Certain categories of programme information on the database require to be approved by the faculty, such as entry requirements, home APs, module content, and programme structure. A formal annual check on the accuracy of programme information is undertaken by programme leaders and the responsible AP during the prospectus production cycle. The Marketing and Communications team oversees consistency in the tone and style of programme information.

141   The print prospectus is designed primarily for young and full-time entrants. It is produced annually and is distributed to schools and colleges to fit with the timing of decision-making for UCAS applicants. A cut-off date is applied for programmes to be included, and the Marketing and Communications team provides a final list of programmes to Partnership Planning Forum for approval.

142   At the time of the current ELIR, the University was working on putting module descriptors on its website. No launch date had been set. The ELIR team was informed that the protocols used in respect of programme information would apply to module information. Students who met the ELIR team indicated that the hard-copy and online programme information provided by UHI was accurate and helpful.

5.5   Effectiveness of the approach to self-evaluation and management of information

143   The University's approach to self-evaluation and the management of information is an area of positive practice. 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.

144   The University is taking an increasingly strategic approach to evaluation, with an emphasis on the systematic identification of key areas for focus for the institution. The comprehensive and robust procedures in place for the monitoring and evaluation of activities at all levels of the institution result in the annual production of a rolling actions list of priorities. The list is derived from QMG subject network dialogue meeting and SNLQM Forum meetings, as well as from key initiatives identified by QAEC. All actions identified are monitored by QAEC on an ongoing basis until their status is considered 'closed'.

145   While external reference points including the Quality Code are explicitly signposted and referenced in the University's policies, regulations and procedures, the University is asked to consider the benefits of producing a single document which maps the University's policies and practices to the expectations of the Quality Code (see paragraph 135).

6   Collaborative activity

6.1   Key features of the institution's strategic approach

146   While UHI does not have an explicit collaborative strategy, collaboration is a core value of the University and applies to both internal and external partnerships and ways of working. The direction for the development of collaborative partnerships is articulated through the University's key strategic themes of student recruitment, widening access, internationalisation and reputation building, and proposals for collaborative activities are required to demonstrate, initially at faculty level, how they align with these strategic themes. The 21 academic collaborative partnerships cited in the Collaborative Register, including the arrangement for the award of research degrees by the University of Aberdeen, are modest in volume, but they represent a wide variety of relationships. These include articulation within Scotland and internationally, joint delivery of degree programmes with institutions in Scotland and China, module contributions to degrees awarded elsewhere, partnerships with professional organisations (for example, the Professional Golfers Association) and partnerships with universities similar to UHI in terms of mission, geography and pedagogy, such as the Federation University, Australia (with whom UHI is developing joint online master's programmes). The ELIR team learned that, given the University's intention to develop its UK and international partnerships, it is intending to prepare strategies for collaboration and internationalisation and has commenced preparatory thinking on these.

147   UHI described its approach to collaborative activity as selective and cautious. In 2014-15, UHI had 240 students registered on its collaborative programmes, with the Hunan Institute of Engineering (HIE) in China representing over 90 per cent of all the University's students on collaborative programmes. Most of the University's other partnerships are

articulation or student exchange arrangements. The University is not currently engaged with franchising or validating activities, although it is keeping this under review.

148   The arrangements for the development and oversight of collaborative activity are explained in the second edition of the Collaborations Handbook, approved in August 2013 by the External Partnerships Steering Committee (EPSC), which reports to Academic Council (AC). This comprehensive Handbook, which is mapped against the Quality Code, *Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others*, sets out the principles and procedures associated with the proposal, approval and monitoring of collaborative partnerships. It includes information on assessment, examinations and the roles of external examiners, staff and student representation and feedback, publicity and marketing, and academic misconduct, appeals and complaints. The Handbook is another example of a high quality document, offering clear guidance and clarification of responsibilities to staff involved with UHI's collaborative provision (see paragraphs 114 and 125).

Oversight

149   EPSC, chaired by the Deputy Principal since 2014, advises AC on all aspects of external collaborative partnerships and provision within the UK and overseas, excluding research-focused collaborations. EPSC meets at least four times per year (normally every six to eight weeks) and its membership includes the deans, senior representatives of the APs with significant collaborative activities, and UHI World (the University's prime marketing arm for international promotion and student recruitment). EPSC's main business normally includes approval to progress to the next stage of initial collaborative proposals, due diligence reports, Memoranda of Understanding (MoU), and Collaboration (MoC), articulation agreements and exchange/study abroad proposals. EPSC also considers revised Memoranda and proposed changes to collaborative relationships. Notwithstanding the relatively modest collaborative partnerships, EPSC papers reflect a large number of diverse proposals with different types of institutions. Some of these build on the expertise of APs with a tradition of collaborative activities, for example Inverness College UHI and Perth College UHI (particularly for study abroad programmes).

Approval

150   Once EPSC has approved in principle proposals to progress to the next stage, the University undertakes due diligence procedures of appropriate proportionality dependent on the nature of the partnership and the type of activity being proposed. Due diligence reports typically provide a background introduction to the institution and the area proposed, a summary of any preliminary interactions and visits to/by the potential partners, and a summary of the proposal. The Collaborative Handbook provides a detailed due diligence template including explicit reference to the Quality Code. Reports on international institutions require information on the political, ethical, cultural and higher education environment within which the partner will be operating.

151   EPSC approval of the due diligence report leads to the signing of a formal non-binding MoU, based on a standard UHI pro forma, and approval to develop specific proposals. EPSC considers formal draft MoCs as part of the formal approval process. While these are properly tailored to the particular development under consideration, the MoCs for both international (for example with Hunan Institute of Engineering, China) and UK (for example with Glasgow Kelvin College) partnerships contain sections on the overall scope of the agreement; programme structure and duration of study; programme responsibilities; admissions; data returns; tuition and staffing arrangements; learning resources and student support; programme management and quality assurance and enhancement arrangements; assessment and examination boards; and termination. There are annexes on financial and administrative arrangements, the latter outlining the programme structure, named

responsibilities, descriptions of roles and the responsibilities of key post-holders. The University also has formal templates for home and overseas articulation agreements.

152   Student exchanges and study abroad opportunities are predominantly in the USA and Canada at centres providing a 'good match' with the University's mission and ethos. The study abroad exchange agreements require to satisfy EPSC on the nature of the agreement, selection and admissions, programme and assessment, student fees and expenses, financial arrangements, communications and publicity. Study abroad requires the approval of the dean or nominee; credit gained may count towards the programme, though not normally towards the final level of the award.

6.2   Securing academic standards of collaborative provision

153   UHI's arrangements for securing the academic standards of its collaborative provision meet sector expectations. Following the partnership approval processes, the University applies the same quality assurance framework for collaborative provision as it has in place for awards delivered exclusively by UHI. However, given the added risk involved in collaboration with new partners, the University requires additional reports to EPSC after the first three and six months of initial programme delivery in addition to its usual planning and approval arrangements. These very comprehensive reports are submitted for approval to the relevant faculty board of studies and EPSC.

154   External examiners are appointed to UHI programmes irrespective of the delivery location, and assessment boards receive data based on the programme as a whole. Assessment boards and programme committees are able to view data disaggregated by geographical cohorts, enabling comparisons of student performance at different locations and pointing to differential interventions as necessary, which is positive.

6.3   Enhancing the student learning experience on collaborative programmes

155   The University has no overall additional arrangements for enhancing the learning experience of students studying with partner institutions because its routine arrangements apply to all of its students wherever they are based. This means that enhancement initiatives apply in principle equally to collaborative programmes. The structure of UHI itself ensures that staff are accustomed to working with colleagues in a number of different organisations and at a distance, and each collaborative programme appoints a lead person who has day-to-day responsibility for links with the partner. UHI staff visit partners to engage with students and to meet with partner staff for whom UHI makes available online staff development opportunities. Nevertheless, the University takes particular care to ensure that its students on collaborative programmes are introduced to the relationship between UHI and the partner at the outset during induction; for example, there are joint inductions for Glasgow Kelvin College and UHI students in Inverness. There are inevitably different student representative arrangements for those learning in partner institutions. The University indicated that course committees and class representatives are organised in a context and forum appropriate to the partnership.

6.4   Effectiveness of the approach to managing collaborative activity

156   The University's arrangements for managing collaborative activity are effective, including detailed and rigorous scrutiny at the approval stage. The requirement of all partnership proposals to be considered by EPSC on the basis of the detailed completion of a sequence of templates adopted University-wide ensures consistency of approach. Ongoing monitoring and review arrangements mirror those applied to UHI's own programmes,

supplemented by additional reporting after the first three and six months of operation. While UHI monitoring reports focus on all programmes wherever they are delivered, it is positive that the University is able to monitor the academic standards of a partner's provision by viewing student performance data disaggregated by location.

157   The University does not currently have an explicit strategy for developing collaborative activity and it is encouraged to progress its intention to introduce one, including articulating priorities for the development of international academic partnerships.