

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

Outcome Report

November 2021



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About the Enhancement-led Institutional Review method

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

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

About this review

This is the Outcome Report of the ELIR conducted by QAA at the University of the Highlands and Islands. The review took place as follows: Planning Visit on 7 October 2021 and Review Visit from 22 to 26 November 2021. The review was conducted by a team of six reviewers:

- Professor Liz Bacon (Academic Reviewer)
- Mr Steve Barnett (Academic Reviewer)
- Dr Maggie King (Academic Reviewer)
- Emeritus Professor Diane Meehan (Academic Reviewer)
- Mr Edward Pollock (Student Reviewer)
- Mr Peter Watson (Coordinating Reviewer).

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

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

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

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

The impact of COVID-19

The ELIR was originally scheduled to take place during spring 2021. This was after the start of the national lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in the ELIR cycle being delayed. In discussion with the University of the Highlands and Islands and the Scottish Funding Council, the University of the Highlands and Islands ELIR was rescheduled to October and November 2021 as detailed above. QAA made some amendments to the ELIR process to accommodate the ongoing pandemic, most notable of which was that the ELIR was conducted entirely online. The ELIR was undertaken while the pandemic, and the institution's response to it, was a key part of the context. Although this was part of the context of the review, the team considered the institution's approach to quality and standards

¹ About ELIR:

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

² About QAA: www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland.

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

⁴ Technical Report:

www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/University-of-the-Highlands-and-Islands

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

About the University of the Highlands and Islands

The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) originated as a proposal first explored in 1991 to create a federal institution, based on existing further and higher education provision in the region. This led to an incorporated institution with validated degrees in 1998, known from 2001 as the UHI Millennium Institute. The UHI Millennium Institute received its Taught Degree Awarding Powers in 2008 and University Title in 2011; Research Degree Awarding Powers were granted in 2017. The University of the Highlands and Islands is a partnership of colleges and research institutions. The 12 colleges and research institutions that form UHI remain as separate autonomous institutions, but have entered into an academic partnership agreement with the University which covers their further education (FE) and higher education (HE) provision. UHI refers to the 12 colleges and research institutions as Academic Partners. With its coverage both of FE and HE, UHI is a tertiary institution, the first in Scotland and one of only a few in Europe.

The 12 Academic Partners range in size, discipline and focus and each has its own character and strong local identity. Many Academic Partners have multiple sites and satellite learning centres. In total, in addition to the main campuses, UHI encompasses delivery from over 70 sites spread across the Highlands and Islands as well as extensive online provision.

UHI is organised academically into two faculties, each headed by a Dean, with Subject Networks within each faculty (Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Business and Faculty of Science, Health and Engineering each have three Subject Networks). In addition to the six Subject Networks, UHI has one further entity within the Faculty of Science, Health and Engineering: the Department of Nursing and Midwifery. The Graduate School covers the interests of all PGR students and supervisory staff in all research areas, and is also headed by a Dean. The Subject Networks operate across Academic Partners and are the key University structures for the management of quality, academic standards and enhancement, overseen by the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC).

As a tertiary institution, enrolling both FE and HE students, UHI's total headcount in 2019-20 was 35,517 students, with HE accounting for 10,220 by headcount (7,309 full-time equivalent (FTE)). Of these students, 92% were studying on undergraduate (and PGDE) programmes, 6% were postgraduate taught (PGT) and 2% were postgraduate research (PGR); 87% of students were UK national, 9% EU and 4% international.

Threshold judgement about 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.

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

Commendations

- 1 The University is commended for the following areas of good practice.
- 2 **Learning and Teaching Academy** - provides an engaging learning and teaching community hub, which is highly valued by staff and acts as an effective connection point across the University academic partner network for academic development and enhancement.
- 3 **Library Services** - deliver an integrated, helpful, and responsive team-based approach which operates effectively as a seamless single service across the University academic partner network and provides support to students across all locations. The service provides parity of provision to all students through its use of digital resources and the targeted support provided during COVID-19, including the free click and collect and postal service available to both staff and students.
- 4 **Personal Academic Tutors** - the Personal Academic Tutor system embedded across the University academic partner network provides an identified point of contact for students, an effective referral mechanism to other University services and results in the effective delivery of an accessible and personalised approach to student support. The system is highly valued by students, provides a fundamental support connection point and is viewed as being integral to their student experience.
- 5 **Virtual Learning Environment transition** - the effective planning, communication and implementation of the virtual learning environment (VLE) project ensured that a smooth transition was effectively achieved by working collaboratively across the University academic partner network. In particular, the approach was well communicated, provided staff and student support, and retained a focus on the use of the VLE as a tool for learning and supporting the student experience.
- 6 **Student mental health support** - the University's strategic approach to developing its student mental health provision has resulted in an effective, well utilised and highly valued set of resources embedded at both University and academic partner levels.
- 7 **Approach to embedding the institutional quality framework** - the University has developed effective approaches to support the dissemination, implementation and embedding of the institutional quality framework across the network of 12 academic partners. The approaches include well defined institutional expectations, which are supported by clear and accessible information and guidance, are well understood, valued by staff and provide a model for the implementation and integration of other University initiatives.

8 **Approaches to assessment and feedback** - the University has taken positive steps since the 2016 ELIR to enhance its approaches to assessment and feedback, as demonstrated by the development of institution-wide policies on marking criteria, moderation, academic integrity, feedback and feedforward.

Recommendations

9 The University is asked to consider the following recommendations.

10 **Articulation and embedding of institutional expectations** - building on the University's achievements of effectively and consistently embedding its quality framework and its Equivalence Policy, the institution should establish a systematic approach to articulating and embedding institutional expectations for other policy and practice across the University academic partner network to support integration and implementation of University initiatives. As part of this, the University is asked to increase the setting and monitoring of institutional expectations to ensure equivalency and to support the achievement of the University's ambitions and strategy.

11 **Collaborative provision** - improve oversight of collaborative activity, ensuring that effective arrangements are in place for identifying and addressing potential operational and strategic risks and concerns. In particular, within the current academic year, the University is asked to strengthen existing processes and develop guidance for the operational management of collaborative provision, along with the development of a review and monitoring process through which the University can more effectively maintain a systematic oversight of collaborative provision.

12 **Institutional strategic approach to retention** - recognising the University's diverse student population and that its student non-continuation data is above the institution benchmark, the University should make demonstrable progress, within the next academic year, to implement an institution-wide, strategic approach to managing retention. In addressing this, the University should consider steps beyond the planned introduction of student engagement indicators and its developments in learning analytics, in order to ensure a more consistent, managed and monitored approach to student non-continuation.

13 **Enhancement and recognition of learning and teaching practice** - in support of the University's aspirations, and in the context of the academic partnership model, develop and articulate an institution-wide staff development approach which supports the enhancement of teaching practice, appropriately values and recognises teaching practice and ensures parity of esteem between teaching and research.

14 **Student engagement and representation** - work in partnership with the Highlands and Islands Student Association to ensure that there are appropriate mechanisms in place to monitor and address vacancies in student representative structures and to promote the value of the student representative role to students and staff across the University and with collaborative partners.

15 **Student surveys** - develop a process to consolidate and analyse the outcomes of all student surveys, so that this information can be used to support cross-network enhancements to the student learning experience. In support of a consolidated approach, the University is asked to ensure student survey outcomes are integrated, data made more accessible to staff, and the mechanisms for closing the feedback loop to students formalised.

16 **Training for postgraduates who teach** - ensure that all current and future postgraduate research students undertaking teaching roles complete the University's standard training course prior to commencing teaching and that an appropriate monitoring mechanism is developed to ensure completion of this training is recorded and monitored to enable institutional oversight.

What happens next?

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

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

Further information

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

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

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

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

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

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