Annual Report
2018-19
Introduction

Rowena Pelik,
Director for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

During 2018–19, QAA Scotland made a telling contribution to the debate on skills in Scotland. We know how important skills are and that they are rapidly rising up the agenda.

The government, employers, universities and graduates are all interested in skills. Graduates want to be confident that their degree will equip them successfully to launch their career and to flourish in the workplace; employers seek graduates who are knowledgeable and can apply that knowledge to adapt to the specific context, work with others effectively and establish themselves quickly; the government wants to know that public money invested brings returns for individuals, for society and the economy. Scotland has outperformed UK averages on a range of graduate outcomes and has successfully done so for several years. QAA’s work has supported the university sector to continue to develop high-performing, high-contributing graduates.

QAA Scotland supports the sector by working as a catalyst and enabler. We listen, reflect back and, together, take a step forward, working collaboratively to support and engender change. Almost 600 students, graduates and employers contributed to our research and 150 delegates attended our two flagship events as part of ‘Focus on: Graduate Skills’. All Scottish HEIs and our partners - the Scottish Funding Council, Universities Scotland, sparqs and Skills Development Scotland - contributed.

In exploring themes around inclusivity, global perspectives and readiness for employment, we generated new insights and promoted the positive contribution of Scotland’s graduates. Effective skills development in higher education equips graduates for the long term; it equips for change - emphasising the nature of being a graduate and the advantage of employing graduates - the greatest contribution will be what they enable to happen, not in year one of employment, but in five, ten or more years. They’ll find the solutions to problems that we do not even know exist yet. They will be rethinking ways of doing - challenging those who are employing to enable existing industries to adapt and new industries to emerge.

The availability of big data and growth of learning analytics has put more emphasis on metrics, targets and key performance indicators to inform judgements on quality and standards. Of course, not everything is easy to measure and what can be measured is not necessarily central to learners and learning. Under the current Enhancement Theme – ‘Evidence for Enhancement’ – one project explored value beyond the metrics. Informally termed ‘the intangibles’, it resulted in a critically-reflective research report and an adaptable toolkit. I highlight it as it is indicative of how QAA Scotland works. We funded the proposal, recognising the importance of surfacing the harder-to-measure and harder-to-reveal evidence of what is important to higher-level learning and learners.

These examples illustrate what can and should be achieved through external quality assurance and enhancement. Activity rooted in current concerns and practices; close connectivity between the quality agency and higher education providers (students, staff, leaders) to enable the identification and prioritisation of current challenges. Challenges that are explored with rigour and result in outputs that are practical, useful and have impact.
Our work in 2018-19

Key highlights

For QAA Scotland, highlights of our work show our impact within Scotland and beyond. In 2018-19 we:

- Continued to strengthen the inter-relationships between review and enhancement activities for the benefit of the sector in Scotland and contributed to the integrity and evolution of Scotland’s Quality Enhancement Framework.
- Successfully completed the ELIR schedule including five institutional reviews and 18 annual discussions (covering both preparation and follow-up activity). The ELIR outcomes provide a rich evidence base which enables us to design and implement meaningful enhancement activities for the sector as a whole.
- Promoted the strengths, values and effectiveness of enhancement-led approaches to quality in higher education across the UK and internationally, thereby supporting the reputation of Scottish higher education.
- Promoted a clear, compelling and confident contribution to the national skills agenda. The ‘Focus On: Graduate Skills’ project informed and influenced the debate in Scotland on Graduate Skills. Almost 600 students, graduates and employers contributed to our research and 150 delegates attended our two flagship events. All Scottish HEIs participated in the work across the academic year, alongside our partner agencies.
- Provided an expert-led webinar series, complete with a set of customisable resources, to upskill staff and students in their use of qualitative and quantitative evidence.
- Worked in partnership with students on an activity pack to support discussions about responding to student voice, and a student-facing guide to using data.
- Produced an online resource to help staff and students navigate the HE Data Landscape by linking data to key quality activities.
- Commissioned research into the use of retention and progression data, resulting in useful, practical resources including key discussion topics and tips for using this data in annual monitoring.
- Managed six collaborative clusters on topics including learning analytics, enhancing programme leadership, evidencing intangible aspects of enhancement, distance and sense of belonging, developing careers support for graduates, and demonstrating impact in the creative disciplines.
• Worked to establish the new group, Quality Arrangements in Scottish Higher Education (QASHE), which plays a strategic and substantial role in ensuring the quality arrangements in Scotland continue to meet the needs of the whole sector and are suitably responsive to regulatory changes in other parts of the UK.
• Hosted and designed an ENQA seminar, which showcased the way in which student-centred approaches to learning and engagement in learning are encapsulated in the Scottish HE sector. This enabled colleagues from across Europe to learn from each other and raised the profile of Scottish higher education.

Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR)

ELIR is the process we use to review and report on how institutions in Scotland maintain the academic standards of their awards and enhance the quality of the student learning experience. In 2018–19, we reviewed the University of Aberdeen, the University of Glasgow, the University of Strathclyde, the University of Dundee and Scotland’s Rural College (SRUC). All of the ELIR reports included a set of commendations and recommendations, with a flavour of each report given below. More detail on our review work and its outcomes can be found on our website.

At the University of Aberdeen, the ELIR team commended the University for effectively supporting the needs of an increasingly diverse student population and championing equality and diversity across the University. Recommendations were made on monitoring personal tutor arrangements; continuing the work to ensure all research students have an equivalent experience in reflecting on the arrangements for training external examiners.

The University of Dundee was commended for the positive working relationship it has established with its students and its clear commitment to teaching and learning. The University was asked to strengthen its management of international collaborative provision.

The University of Glasgow was commended for success in promoting equality and diversity, and the strong partnership it has built with its student community. It was recommended to make its external examiners’ reports accessible to students and to ensure that it systematically monitors the experience of postgraduate research students.

“We are constantly striving to improve the quality of learning and experience of our students and to improve access to higher education. It is great to see that the hard work of our staff and students has been recognised in the QAA reports.”

Professor Peter McGeorge
Vice-Principal Education, University of Aberdeen

1 www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/University-of-Aberdeen
2 www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/University-of-Glasgow
3 www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/University-of-Strathclyde
4 www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/University-of-Dundee
5 www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/Scotlands-Rural-College
6 www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/en/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review
The University of Strathclyde received commendation for working in partnership with its students, establishing strong connections with industry, and providing opportunities for students to receive an international university experience. The University was asked to ensure all postgraduate research students receive formal training before commencing teaching or assessing others; and to share information with students about its external examiners.

Finally, Scotland’s Rural College (SRUC) was commended for its work to raise awareness of mental health issues, and the support it offers its students in this area. It received recommendations on ensuring distance-learning students are effectively supported; enhancing the use of data to support students’ learning experiences and on the consistency of assessment feedback.

“’We’d like to thank the review team for their approach to the ELIR and for their recommendations on areas where we can improve, which are ongoing areas of activity... We are already taking steps through appointing new people, ongoing projects and new support structures that will help us meet the recommendations and use them as platform for constant enhancement and improvement.”

Jamie Newbold
Academic Director, SRUC

Focus On projects

Each year, QAA Scotland runs a Focus On project in which topics that frequently occur in the analyses of ELIR reports are explored in a developmental manner with the sector. The choice of topic is made in partnership with the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC).

The Focus On: Graduate Skills project ran during session 2018-19, and the resources from this Focus On work are available on the QAA Scotland website. We commissioned two research reports generating new insights into the views of current students, graduates and employers on the skills developed by students at higher education institutions in Scotland.

Two flagship events were held in June 2019. The Sharing Practice event was designed to let colleagues share ideas and practice, and to provoke debate and reflection around graduate skills development in an open and supportive environment. It was attended by around 100 delegates including staff and students from UK and international institutions as well as representatives from Scottish sector bodies. The Shaping Strategy event was an opportunity for a multi-stakeholder dialogue on the future of graduate skills in Scotland. Discussions covered our approach in an international context, the future challenges we face and our readiness as a sector to address these challenges. The event was designed to contribute to policy direction in the Scottish HE sector. We were joined by 60 delegates including institutional policy-makers, international speakers, and representation from the Scottish Government.

7 www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/focus-on
Enhancement Theme

Enhancement Themes enable the sector to explore a specific area in depth through both sector-wide, collective activity and programmes of work within each institution. Together the sector achieves far more than institutions could individually, encouraging innovation and sharing good practice with the aim of enhancing the student learning experience in Scottish higher education. Managed by QAA Scotland, the Enhancement Themes have had a positive impact on the Scottish higher education sector since their launch in 2003 and attract interest from around the world.

2018–19 was the second year of the current Enhancement Theme - Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience. The Key Activity and Outputs 2017–19 provides a high-level overview of work and outputs from the first two years of the Theme. The restructured Theme web pages provide access to a mix of over 70 existing and novel resources.

The Theme work has been undertaken across three broad strands:

- student engagement including students generating and using evidence
- optimising the use of existing evidence
- student demographics, retention and attainment.

Six collaborative clusters were supported in 2018–19, covering a range of topics and producing innovative work. For example, ‘Beyond the metrics: Charting the intangible aspects of enhancement in the age of accountability’ has provided a renewed understanding of how to identify and evaluate the intangible assets that contribute to the success of higher education - teaching quality and student success - beyond the proxy indicators of student satisfaction, educational outcomes and graduate salaries.

QAA worked closely with a small team of higher education planners who developed the HE Data Landscape resource and worked on an in-depth analysis of Scottish sector National Student Survey performance.

The two student engagement sector-level projects have produced highly-regarded resources including a Guide to Using Evidence in Higher Education. Indeed, students have played a key role in the Themes work at all levels and students/student representatives have comprised just under one-fifth of institutional team membership.

8 www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/focus-on
9 www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/current-enhancement-theme/defining-and-capturing-evidence/the-intangibles-beyond-the-metrics
12 www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/current-enhancement-theme/student-engagement-and-demographics/students-using-evidence
As part of the work of the Theme, during session 2018-19, QAA Scotland also ran a series of webinars with a range of sector leaders and experts. These webinars considered the use of different types of data (both quantitative and qualitative) in a variety of contexts. The webinars attracted over 300 attendees and around half were from Scottish institutions and students’ associations. The webinars also welcomed attendees from all over the UK as well as Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Ecuador, Hong Kong, Ireland, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Trinidad and Tobago, and the USA.

"Over the last year, QAA Scotland has continued to work extensively to support student engagement in the Evidence for Enhancement Theme. Students have been key to the success of the Theme, and it has been great to see how a range of informative resources have been shaped and developed in partnership with students as part of the Student-led Project. These materials have been really well received by students and we envisage there will be ways in which we can embed these resources to support students to engage with data in years to come."

Eve Lewis
Director, Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (sparqs)

The policy environment

2018-19 saw QAA continue its active engagement with the policy environment in Scotland. Summer 2018 saw the appointment of Richard Lochhead MSP as the new Scottish Government Minister for Higher Education, Further Education and Science. QAA Scotland worked to make contact with the new minister and had an introductory meeting with him in the Scottish Parliament. The meeting was used as an opportunity to outline the work of the Quality Enhancement Framework and how QAA operated effectively across the UK in a devolved context.

One issue that has continued to be at the forefront of discussions is academic integrity and working to prevent the operation of essay mills services. At a UK level, QAA has continued to facilitate the Academic Integrity Advisory Group, bringing together stakeholders from all nations of the UK. QAA has continued to support universities in combating essay mills and has pushed for legislation on the issue from the UK Government.

2018-19 also saw significant press and political interest in changing degree classifications, often referred to as ‘grade inflation’. In Scotland, as part of its research into the issue, QAA contacted Scottish HEIs and it is evident that they are doing their own work to analyse the trends and potential causes of changes in degree classification. The research identified that a large amount of the changes may be due to grade improvement, rather than inflation, due to reasons such as Scotland having higher entry tariffs because of a capped admissions system. This is different to the ‘unexplained’ cases of inflation in England. The sector in Scotland also worked to produce an agreed UK text as part of the recently-published statement of intent of degree classification. The statement was developed by UUK, GuildHE and QAA work on behalf of, and as members of, the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment.

As the Scottish sector is often having to respond to issues or concerns that originate outside of Scotland, QAA worked with Universities Scotland to develop a new sector wide group for Scotland that could act to proactively work to promote and discuss issues around quality, and that would allow Scotland to have a unified voice at the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment. The group, known as Quality Arrangements for Scottish Higher Education (QASHE), has brought together representatives from various types of Scottish institution plus colleagues from Universities Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council, Scottish Government, National Union of Students, Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (sparqs), Scottish Planners Forum, Universities Scotland and QAA. Stakeholders across the sector
have already made it clear how useful this new QAA-managed committee is to them, and it has seen action taken to conduct further research on grade profiles, for example.

QAA Scotland has also continued to strengthen its international engagement. In November 2018, QAA Scotland hosted a visit of 27 senior representatives of specialist arts institutions in Beijing. The visit was to learn more about the enhancement-led approach to quality assurance in Scotland. The following month in December, QAA Scotland then hosted a workshop for the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), which focused on the quality assurance of student-centred learning and the role of students in assessing it.

QAA Scotland has also worked to support the development of the new QAA Characteristics Statement on Higher Education Apprenticeships; continued to support the implementation of the Scottish Government's Learner Journey Review; and engaged with Members of the Scottish Parliament who have new roles in scrutinising higher education.

QAA in Scotland

QAA Scotland’s work is enhancement-led in order to have a dynamic, responsive approach to quality assurance firmly based on a partnership with the sector involving students and staff. The work of QAA Scotland has been guided by the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) since 2003 and you can read more about the Quality Enhancement Framework on our website.13 The Quality Enhancement Framework has five elements:

- **Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR)**14
  Incorporates periodic institutional reviews, published reports, thematic analyses, annual discussions and a series of follow-up activities.

- **Scotland’s Enhancement Themes**15
  Enhancement Themes bring all Scottish higher education institutions together to participate in a programme of activity designed to deliver change around an agreed strategic topic.

- **Institution-led Review (ILR)**16
  QAA Scotland engages with each institution on an annual basis to reflect on the outcomes of these reviews and compiles an annual report to the Scottish Funding Council summarising these activities for the whole Scottish higher education sector.

- **Student engagement in quality**17
  In Scotland, our approach involves students as partners at the heart of the system including through the inclusion of student members in all ELIR review teams, through student involvement in the Enhancement Themes, and as members of our committees and working groups.

- **Public information about quality**18
  QAA Scotland produces public information on quality, through publication of the outcomes of ELIR reviews and other strategic reporting.

QAA Scotland proactively supports the dissemination and exchange of good practice, through institutional reviews, our national enhancement work and the provision of extensive web resources. We are committed to building and maintaining strong and effective relationships with our partners in the sector, with student representative bodies, and with other agencies.

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13 [www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/quality-enhancement-framework](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/quality-enhancement-framework)
14 [www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review)
15 [www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk)
16 [www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/quality-enhancement-framework/institution-led-review-(ilr)](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/quality-enhancement-framework/institution-led-review-(ilr))
17 [www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/quality-enhancement-framework/student-engagement](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/quality-enhancement-framework/student-engagement)
18 [www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/quality-enhancement-framework/public-information](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/quality-enhancement-framework/public-information)
About QAA across the UK and Internationally

"QAA is commended for its wide involvement of stakeholders (primarily academics, students, administrators, business, and education sector representatives) in the governance of the agency, development of quality assurance policies and procedures, and enhancement work. QAA is commended for having a robust governance and well-developed internal quality assurance system which is applied rigorously."

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

QAA is an independent body entrusted with monitoring and advising on standards and quality in UK higher education. QAA is independent of government and higher education providers, and acts in the public interest, for the benefit of students and to protect the standing and reputation of UK higher education qualifications and awards. We are dedicated to ensuring that students working towards a UK qualification get the higher education experience they are entitled to expect.

Our work is highly respected throughout the world and it is formally recognised through acceptance on the European Quality Assurance Register and through our work with quality assurance agencies across the globe. QAA's work reviewing UK higher education in other countries provides assurance in the quality of the education and awards for students, governments and other organisations.

QAA develops and maintains the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code). This defines and sets out the Expectations that all providers of UK higher education are required to meet. The Quality Code is used by higher education providers in setting, describing and assuring the academic standards of their higher education awards and programmes, and the quality of the learning opportunities they provide. The Quality Code is developed by QAA through consultation with the higher education sector and key stakeholders, including students and employers.

UK higher education continues to grow and diversify. QAA's approach enables us to respond to the differing education policies across the home nations of the UK, safeguarding standards and supporting the improvement of quality for students – whether they study in Scotland, England, Wales or Northern Ireland, at a university or college in the UK, or in any other location worldwide where courses lead to UK higher education qualifications.

QAA works internationally to promote the interests of UK higher education, to build understanding of the UK higher education system and thus make it easier for UK providers to operate in other countries and for UK graduates to work globally.

The scale, shape, structure and purpose of learning provision are changing in the UK and around the world. QAA remains uniquely placed to anticipate and respond to change in order to continue to safeguard the reputation of UK higher education wherever it is delivered, support economic opportunity for the UK, and provide assurance to those who invest in and undertake learning.
The year ahead

Professor John Sawkins
Pro-Vice-Chancellor of Heriot-Watt University and incoming Chair of QAA Scotland Strategic Advisory Committee

This has been another busy but highly-productive year for QAA Scotland. As well as the ongoing programme of Enhancement-led Institutional Reviews, more outstanding work has been delivered through Enhancement Theme and Focus On projects. The current Theme – Evidence for Enhancement – comes to an end in 2019-20. Once again, this Theme work has proved valuable in catalysing activities which have enabled sector stakeholders to reflect critically and creatively on all our higher education provision.

The distinctive enhancement-led approach to quality in Scotland is founded on a partnership model involving students, providers, funders, and the quality body (QAA Scotland). This partnership has been in place since 2003 and has stood the various tests of the intervening years. It is vital, of course, to periodically check that the model remains fit-for-purpose through internal and external evaluations. This year, an adaptation to our sector-level mechanisms, has been the creation of the Quality Arrangements for Scottish Higher Education (QASHE) Group. The group is managed jointly by QAA Scotland and Universities Scotland, and its membership includes all parties to the original Quality Enhancement Framework. It provides a ‘neutral’ space - in which all partners have equal voice - to focus on the best interests of Scottish higher education in the light of regulatory shifts in England and those remaining UK-wide dimensions such as the Quality Code, TNE and matters of common concern including academic integrity.

Next year’s QAA Scotland activities - the launch of a new Theme, a new Focus On Project and the June 2020 International Enhancement Conference in Glasgow - will take place against a particularly complex and fast-moving political backdrop. Consequently, QAA Scotland’s commitment to working collaboratively with stakeholders and partners within Scotland, the UK and internationally has never been more important.

I look forward to succeeding Professor Phil Winn as Chair of the QAA Scotland Advisory Committee and to working with the team to ensure Scotland’s distinctive enhancement-based approach to quality continues to evolve to meet new challenges and opportunities.
Our year in pictures

Enhancement Themes student-led project event in Edinburgh, February 2019

QAA welcomed ENQA to a workshop in Glasgow

Enhancement Theme event on Student Surveys

New Themes paku-paku

Enhancement Themes Bauble, Christmas 2018

Focus On Graduate Skills event

Evidence for Enhancement event, December 2018

QAA Scotland sponsored the Herald Higher Education Awards once again

QAA Scotland hosted senior figures from Beijing universities to hear about the Scottish enhancement-led approach to quality
### Twitter

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<th>@QAAScotland</th>
<th>@THEMEStweets</th>
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<td><strong>3,430</strong> Engagements for year</td>
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<td>↑ +2,461 (+230%) over previous year</td>
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<td><strong>1,095</strong> Followers at end of year</td>
<td><strong>1,272</strong> Followers at end of year</td>
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<td>↑ +290 (+36%) over previous year</td>
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### LinkedIn

- **58%** increase in followers from previous year

### Quality Enhancement Newsletter

- **1,495** recipients 2018-19
- **36.1%** open rate