To many people, busy working in Scotland’s universities, the last year may well have looked like business as usual for QAA, outside the wider uncertainty of the UK’s plans to leave the EU of course. Across Scotland, ELIR continued with preparations made, visits undertaken, and outcomes realised. The new Enhancement Theme, Evidence for Enhancement, was formally launched in October 2017 and a successful conference was held around the Theme at Glasgow Caledonian University in the summer of 2018. The Focus On projects powered ahead, with feedback from assessment the centre of attention this year. Other work included new Country Reports, fresh guidance on degree apprenticeships, and review visits of two universities undertaken in advance of the publication of the review reports.

Within QAA, one might have seen the restructured QAA Scotland Advisory Committee meeting regularly and reporting to the main QAA Board on matters of significance to Scotland, such as the Government’s 15-24 Learner Journey Review. One might have seen as well that QAA has been re-accredited by ENQA, a major achievement and significant strengthening of our international position.

Further south, the Higher Education Research Bill transitioned at Westminster to become the 2017 Higher Education Research Act and generated a new risk-based regulatory structure, along with a regulator whose statutory duties include the promotion of value for money in English higher education, and competition between English providers. The Act also created the Office for Students to oversee this new regulatory structure in England. What this in turn required was a Designated Quality Body to undertake key responsibilities such as the assessment of quality and standards, advising the Office for Students on the granting, varying or revocation of degree awarding powers, and operating the quality assessment system.

QAA did indeed become the Designated Quality Body early in 2018, confirming its continuing place in quality assurance in each nation of the UK. While QAA’s place in the new framework has been confirmed, it will need to adapt to new systems of operation and funding. It’s also the case that there is a wider differentiation of quality assurance and enhancement across the four nations of the UK than there has been before. Maintaining coherence across the UK is and always has been a feature of QAA’s work, with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) central to that consistency. It is important that we can continue to have a clear understanding of the shape of “UK-ness”, with a strong narrative describing how a unity of purpose across the UK accommodates the diversity of quality arrangements between the nations.

QAA is proud to serve the sector, helping to deliver the best possible experience for each new generation of students. It has faced and dealt with fundamental challenges over the last several years and we are confident that it will meet the new challenges of the coming ones. Change is being embraced: given that Scotland’s universities have been successfully evolving for 600 years, we are confident that the future will still have within it an outstanding Scottish higher education system, with QAA still central to its quality assurance and enhancement.
Introduction
Rowena Pelik,
Director, Nations and International, QAA

Our work in Scotland
We have sought to capture the impact and experience of our work in the Annual Report this year with more quick facts, photographs and quotations. I hope you get a good sense of what our work means in practice for students and staff here in Scotland.

The new Enhancement Theme was launched. Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience reflects how increasing attention is paid to the outcomes of investments and interventions, on understanding and evidencing what makes a positive difference for students. Energy and enthusiasm suffused the Theme Conference in June.

The Theme aims to help ensure that the higher education sector in Scotland is well placed to take effective advantage of available information and data, as well as how ‘big data’ and learning analytics can help us improve the student learning experience and empower students to understand themselves as learners.

We have maintained close links with the Europe-wide SHEILA project (Supporting Higher Education to Integrate Learning Analytics) and also involved a new body of staff - university planners - with Theme work.

A new feature in the delivery of the Theme was the notion of the collaborative cluster. Groups of institutions were able to bid for funding to enable a particular topic to be explored. The clusters have enabled an additional and very valuable way of engaging in topics that are wider than a single institution and have broad applicability.

Feedback from Assessment was the Focus On project this year. As part of this, the rich qualitative information available in students’ nominations for Student led Teaching Awards was analysed across the sector enabling us to gain real insight into what students tell us is good feedback for them and what our students value. It is an indicative example of what Scotland’s collaborative approach readily enables.

We had very positive feedback on the new iteration of ELIR. The first review visits were successful. This built on the thoughtful changes introduced in ‘ELIR4,’ the quality of the training that supports our reviewers and briefings and officer support for institutions.

Our work across the UK and internationally
QAA Scotland was part of Scotland’s delegation to the 2018 European Higher Education Area Ministerial Conference in May which approved the Paris Communiqué that takes the Bologna Process on forwards to the next Conference in Rome in 2020.

The Country Reports we produce provide information and insights for institutions across the UK. In 2016–17 we published reports on the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Republic of Ireland. We also conducted the review of UK transnational education in Hong Kong.

Earlier work in Scotland fed into a major update of ‘Enterprise and Entrepreneurialism in Education: Guidance for UK Higher Education Providers’, which launched in January.

The Scottish sector has been involved in much of our UK-wide work making a substantial contribution to the ongoing development of the revised Quality Code, to work on degree outcomes and has supported our work around issues of academic integrity.
The Annual Report

The QAA Scotland Annual Report 2017-18 outlines our key achievements for the operational year. It includes details on our enhancement-led approach to quality assurance, how we have operated in an evolving policy environment, and how we have continued to ensure the work of QAA in Scotland links closely with QAA’s other activities across the UK and internationally. At the end of this report are references to selected publications and resources we have produced over the year. Throughout the document, we have included images which showcase our activity from the past year and quotes from key stakeholders demonstrating the value and impact that QAA brings to the higher education sector in Scotland.

Our work in 2017-18

Key highlights

- Delivery of the first reviews as part of the fourth cycle of the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR 4) with early feedback suggesting the method supports institutions to achieve their own strategic priorities and dovetails more easily with institutions’ planned evaluative activity.
- The launch and first year of the new Enhancement Theme, Evidence for Enhancement, culminating in an excellent and energising conference in Glasgow in June 2018.
- A strong student-led project in the Theme created practical principles for responding to the student voice and featured close collaboration between QAA Scotland and Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (sparqs).
- Evidence of increased linkages between our work and wider policy activity in the sector with close engagement between the Enhancement Theme and the institutional planners to link their data evaluation expertise to the learning and teaching development activity.
- Continuing to strengthen the inter-relationships between review and enhancement activities for the benefit of the sector in Scotland and contribute to the integrity and evolution of Scotland’s Quality Enhancement Framework.
- Promoting 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.
- QAA as part of the UK-Scotland Ministerial delegation to the Bologna/European Higher Education Area (EHEA) Summit in May 2018.
The Focus On: Feedback from Assessment project reviewed sector progress since the original Focus On: Assessment and Feedback project, as well as sharing developments in the use of technology to support assessment feedback and providing detailed insight to what students value in feedback.

We continue to explore the use of new formats to reach wider and new audiences - we added Twitter chats to our repertoire, extended our use of webinars and piloted a new ‘in conversation’ event format to share practice and expertise in a collegiate environment.

Continuing to be responsive to changes in the UK’s quality landscape and to international developments in quality assurance and enhancement.
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 2017-18, we reviewed Queen Margaret University (QMU) and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. More detail on our review work and its outcomes can be found on our website.

Queen Margaret University’s review identified that it has created a strong ethos of student partnership and an exemplary approach to raising aspirations and attainment of students from all backgrounds. The ELIR team commendations highlighted its holistic and student-centred approach to widening participation and supporting students from all backgrounds to succeed; its programmes and staff that focus on preparing students for employment and the strong partnership with its students in developing and refreshing the University strategy. Recommendations in the report included an encouragement to continue working with students on improving the consistency of academic feedback on assignments and ensuring that the student learning experience for programmes delivered by collaborative partners is consistent with the University’s ‘home’ programmes.

The review of the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland found that it has created an environment where mental and physical disability is no barrier to achievement, and an impressive 97 per cent of students from all backgrounds go on to employment or further study.

Reporting on its vision to be ‘Scotland’s globally recognised and inspirational leader in learning for the performing arts’, QAA commended the Conservatoire for good practice in a number of areas including its culture of equality and diversity; the proto-professional environment and the many opportunities to study across disciplines, which is particularly distinctive for a Conservatoire; a strongly student-centred and personalised experience that allows students to build their own curriculum from the modules and extracurricular opportunities available; and the master’s qualification in learning and teaching, which leads the way in arts education in the wider community. Recommendations for improvement included continuing with plans to ensure institutional strategies are aligned more closely with the Strategic Plan and with each other, further developing its assessment policy and practice, and improving the communication of key institutional policies and regulations to staff and students by considering their content, format and mode of dissemination.

“We were pleased to participate in the first year of the new methodology, which we consider has evolved very positively since the introduction of ELIR to the Scottish sector in 2003”

Dawn Martin, Governance and Quality Enhancement at Queen Margaret University

“It’s most gratifying for us all at Scotland’s national conservatoire to receive such glowing praise from an international panel of experts for the excellence of our educational experience and the quality and employability of our graduates.”

Professor Jeffrey Sharkey, Principal, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

1 www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/Queen-Margaret-University-Edinburgh
2 www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/Royal-Conservatoire-of-Scotland
3 www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review
Focus On projects

Each year, QAA Scotland runs a Focus On project in which topics frequently occurring in 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: Feedback from Assessment project ran during 2017-18, and the resources from this Focus On work are available on the QAA Scotland website.4

Materials include a series of short films highlighting student and staff views on the future of feedback and the use of technology for feedback; and a report on what the data from student-led teaching awards tells us about students’ perceptions of what makes good feedback.

4  www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/focus-on
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 the sharing of effective 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.

2017-18 was the first year for the new Enhancement Theme, Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience, with its formal launch event taking place in Edinburgh in October 2017. The sector-level strands of work have been:

- Responding to the Student Voice: Communicating the Impact was the main student-led project. It focused on how institutions and Students’ Associations respond to student feedback and produced a series of resources.
- Optimising the use of existing evidence has had a focus on upskilling staff and students. Over the course of the Theme, QAA will publish details of new developments and share resources from the sector. This strand will include a series of webinars on the use of evidence for the 2018-19 academic year.
- Student demographics, retention and attainment work included: a literature review, which analyses policy and practice in reporting retention and progression evidence; and consultative research within Scottish institutions to explore the use of evidence in the design, development and implementation of effective interventions to improve student retention and progression.

“The new Enhancement Theme, Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience has really gained momentum and been embraced by student representatives as well as staff across the sector, drawing in new groups of staff such as planners to support enhancement.”

Professor Karl Leydecker, Vice-Principal (Learning and Teaching) at the University of Dundee and Leader for the Evidence for 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 the sharing of effective 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.

2017-18 was the first year for the new Enhancement Theme, Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience, with its formal launch event taking place in Edinburgh in October 2017. The sector-level strands of work have been:

- Responding to the Student Voice: Communicating the Impact was the main student-led project. It focused on how institutions and Students’ Associations respond to student feedback and produced a series of resources.
- Optimising the use of existing evidence has had a focus on upskilling staff and students. Over the course of the Theme, QAA will publish details of new developments and share resources from the sector. This strand will include a series of webinars on the use of evidence for the 2018-19 academic year.
- Student demographics, retention and attainment work included: a literature review, which analyses policy and practice in reporting retention and progression evidence; and consultative research within Scottish institutions to explore the use of evidence in the design, development and implementation of effective interventions to improve student retention and progression.

5 www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/current-enhancement-theme/sector-wide-activity/responding-to-student-voice
The 15th Annual Enhancement Conference took place on 7 June 2018 and was attended by more than 360 delegates. The Conference hashtag #ETconf18 was the top Twitter trend for Glasgow for most of the day. Materials including video footage of the event can be found on the Enhancement Themes website.

The policy environment

QAA is committed to developing and delivering services that meet the needs of each part of the UK (as it does through different approaches to institutional review) while maintaining and supporting the framework that supports the whole UK, such as the Quality Code, and a consistent approach to academic standards. 2017-18 saw the development of a revised Quality Code, with QAA actively involved in the consultation process, engaging stakeholders across the UK nations ensuring the Quality Code would continue to be a UK-wide document that also suited the new regulatory requirements for England. Workshops were held in Glasgow and Edinburgh to discuss the development of the revised Quality Code and its supporting advice and guidance. The revised Quality Code was formally approved by the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment in February 2018 and the complete Quality Code along with its supporting documents was produced in November 2018.
The first meeting of the new QAA Scotland Strategic Advisory Committee took place the start of September 2017. The Committee succeeds the previous QAA Scotland Committee, with a more focused membership and Terms of Reference. Membership of the Committee includes representatives from QAA, the Scottish Funding Council, the Scottish Government, the National Union of Students and Universities Scotland. The Committee discusses key issues facing the higher education sector in Scotland, in order to provide advice and guidance to the UK QAA Board.

In February 2018, QAA was confirmed by the UK Secretary of State for Education as the designated quality body for England, under the provisions of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. The new regulatory landscape and divergence within the UK means QAA has been working to ensure there continues to be an element of “UK-ness” which links the UK higher education sector. For example, in 2017-18 QAA Scotland secured a place on the Advisory Group for Student Information in Scotland (AGSIS), where discussions have focused on how there can continue to be a functioning UK-wide framework related to data and student information.

On the issue of academic integrity, QAA has been working closely with the UK Department for Education, the National Union of Students, Universities UK, Guild HE and other experts. In October 2017, QAA published guidance for universities and colleges on identifying and tackling contract cheating. QAA is set to work with sector experts again to expand on this programme of work and ensure that higher education providers have the resources they need to promote academic integrity.

QAA is a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and in 2017-18 it underwent its scheduled review. QAA Scotland contributed to the Self-Assessment Report (SAR) to provide context on the specific role it plays in Scotland. The QAA Scotland Strategic Advisory Committee also scrutinised the draft SAR and provided feedback which shaped the final submission. ENQA's final review report of QAA was published in July 2018 and QAA received several commendations. The panel identified QAA as “internationally, one of the leading quality assurance agencies”.

Higher education in apprenticeships has continued to develop at rapid pace across the UK nations. QAA Scotland officers have continued to participate in the UK-wide steering group and contributed to the development of the revised guidance on higher education in apprenticeships, which was published in summer 2018. A presentation on the approaches in Scotland was also delivered at the QAA's Annual Quality Summit, helping to broaden understanding of the different approaches in Scotland to a UK audience.

QAA Scotland has continued to actively engage with the Scottish Government 15–24 Learner Journey Review and the implementation of the recommendations of its report, which was published in May 2018. QAA has participated in stakeholder events in addition to its role on some of the implementation working groups and has been able to draw upon its expertise. QAA Scotland has also continued to engage in sector-wide events, attend conferences and provide briefings on quality assurance and enhancement to key stakeholders in the higher education sector and in the broader political sphere.

7 www.qaa.ac.uk/news-events/news/european-plaudits-for-qaa-and-uk-higher-education-quality-assurance
8 www.qaa.ac.uk/news-events/news/qaa-has-published-quality-assuring-higher-education-in-apprenticeships
QAA in Scotland

QAA Scotland’s work is enhancement-led in order to have 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 since 2003 and you can read more about the Quality Enhancement Framework on our website.\(^9\) The Quality Enhancement Framework has five elements:

- **Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR)\(^{10}\)**
  Incorporates periodic institutional reviews, published reports, thematic analyses, annual discussions and a series of follow-up activities.

- **Scotland’s Enhancement Themes\(^{11}\)**
  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)\(^{12}\)**
  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 SFC summarising these activities for the whole Scottish higher education sector.

- **Student engagement in quality\(^{13}\)**
  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\(^{14}\)**
  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.

---

9 [www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/quality-enhancement-framework](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/quality-enhancement-framework)
10 [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)
11 [www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk)
12 [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))
14 [www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/quality-enhancement-framework/public-information](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/quality-enhancement-framework/public-information)
“QAA Scotland’s ability to bring together colleagues from across the sector in an enhancement-focused dialogue has been vital in helping advance how we engage students in the active enhancement of the student learning experience, not only within our institutions but across the whole Scottish Sector. In 2017-18 they facilitated a sector-wide exercise to draw on international best practice in communicating the impact of the student voice, providing a suite of guidelines to support the sector to enhance its practice in this area going forward”.

Matt Adie, Vice President Education of the University of Stirling Students’ Union (2016-18)

Looking towards 2018-19

In 2018-19 we’ll be undertaking the review visits to the universities of Dundee, Aberdeen, Glasgow, Strathclyde and Scotland’s Rural University College. It is year two of the Evidence for Enhancement Theme and the established strands, at sector level, student-led, the collaborative clusters and institution-based work will all be motoring ahead. We will also begin planning the end of Theme International Conference, scheduled for June 2020.

Picking up on the importance of the skills and aptitudes developed through degree-level education for students, for graduates, for employers and for a thriving economy, our Focus On project will be Graduate Skills. In order to continue to reach wider audiences we’ll be delivering a series of webinars on the topic of Optimising Existing Evidence.
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. 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.
Resources

A wide range of practical resources are available for download from our Enhancement Themes website and the new QAA Scotland website.

Selected QAA Scotland publications 2017-18

A wealth of resources are available from the 2018 Enhancement Themes Conference, including plenary presentations, papers and posters.

A selection of published material from the 2017-18 year includes:

**Leaflet**
- Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student experience – Promoting work for the Enhancement Theme.

**Booklets**
- Focus On: Feedback from Assessment – Promoting resources from the 2017-18 project
- Navigating Transitions (for students) – Promoting Student Transitions: Skills and Strategies resources.

**Postcards**
- Training and support for postgraduate students who teach – Aimed at postgraduate research students
- Focus On: Feedback from Assessment films – Promoting three short films from the 2017-18 project
- Navigating Transitions (for students) – Promoting Student Transitions: Skills and Strategies resources.

**Briefings**
- Student Engagement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement
- QAA Scotland: Strategic Directions 2017-20 This short document provides an overview of QAA Scotland’s vision and strategic priorities to 2020, and complements QAA’s Strategy 2017-20.

**ELIR Reports**
- Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (Published in 2018-19 following 2017-18 review)
- Queen Margaret University (Published in 2018-19 following 2017-18 review)
- University of Abertay Dundee, ELIR follow-up report, October 2017.

---

15 [www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/news-events/conference](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/news-events/conference)
Our year in pictures

Launch event for the new Enhancement Theme, “Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience”

Student Voice Think Tank event

The #ETConf18 hashtag was the top trend on Twitter in Glasgow

UK Quality Code consultation event

Focus On: Feedback from Assessment event

15th International Enhancement Conference, Glasgow 2018

The new Enhancement Theme branding was launched in 2017

QAA Scotland staff raised over £100 for a local charity as part of their Christmas festivities

QAA attended the 2018 NUS Scotland Conference

The Enhancement Conference app was hugely popular

Glasgow trends

1 #ETConf18

@shellmc is Tweeting about this