Introduction

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It is stating the obvious to say that we are in unprecedented times. Like institutions and national agencies across the country, QAA had to learn fast and move quickly in the 2019–20 academic year. That applied to me personally, as I started my role on 8 January 2020, and within six weeks found myself in lockdown having had little time to build relationships with universities, national agencies and even QAA staff.

This annual report covers the academic year 2019 through to 2020, and so harks back to a time of simplicity and constancy, then hits the wall of pandemic and lockdown.

In QAA Scotland, we tried our very best to understand the challenges being faced by providers and respond quickly enough to be useful.

We were prescient with our ‘Focus On: Technology Enhanced Learning’ event in April, and we swiftly adapted our signature International Enhancement Conference to online, delivering an extremely well attended and received event over two days in June. We developed and issued guidance as quickly as we could on common matters of concern, supported by discussions at regular meetings and webinars, and QAA Scotland staff played a central role in shaping the broader UK-wide guidance and leading discussions at global online events.

So, like most we have learned a great deal during this period; the QAA Scotland team have been flexible and creative in continuing to provide support and advice on quality throughout the year. Taking the sector advice, we have restarted ELIR using an online methodology, and have supported the transition to a new Enhancement Theme – Resilient Learning Communities. However, if we have learnt anything, it is that things will be different in future.

With a background of the Scottish Funding Council Review of tertiary education, we need to work with the sector to understand what needs to stay the same and what needs to change in future. I look forward to exploring that, through developments such as the review of the ELIR methodology, to ensure that QAA is still supporting quality in Scotland in the most effective way for a new normal.
Our work in 2019-20

Key highlights

For QAA Scotland, highlights of our work show our impact within Scotland and beyond. In 2019-20 these include:

- Using our Enhancement Theme and Focus On work to play an important role in supporting the higher education sector pivot to online learning. QAA Scotland staff also supported work on the rapid publication of QAA's suite of COVID-19 support and guidance.
- Completion and publication of the reports of two Enhancement-lead Institutional Reviews (ELIR), while supporting four other institutions to adapt their ELIR schedules following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. We also worked with institutions and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to ensure their Institution-lead Review (ILR) activity would continue to work effectively in the new circumstances.
- At the end of session 2019-20, we were completing our three-year Enhancement Theme - Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience - which included the delivery of a large online conference in June 2020.
- We completed our 2019-20 Focus On project - Technology Enhanced Learning, delivering two online events and developing a rich and timely Resource Hub for the sector as they adapted to increased learning, teaching and assessment in online virtual spaces.
- Supporting the Scottish higher education sector by managing the sector-wide group, Quality Arrangements in Scottish Higher Education (QASHE), which helps the Scottish sector to establish a common voice on UK-wide issues. 2019-20 saw the group become further representative of the Scottish sector.

About QAA

QAA is the 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.

QAA develops and maintains the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (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.
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 at a university or college in the UK - in Scotland, England, Wales or Northern Ireland - 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, therefore, make it easier for UK providers to operate in other countries and for UK graduates to work globally.

QAA’s work in Scotland 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.

The Quality Enhancement Framework has five elements:

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

**Scotland’s Enhancement Themes**
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)**
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**
In Scotland, a key element of our approach involves students as partners, with student engagement elicited in a range of ways. Students are members of all ELIR review teams, are involved in the Enhancement Themes, and are members of our committees and working groups.

**Public information about quality**
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.
Responding to the pandemic

The 2019–20 academic year saw the outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic, which required the higher education sector and QAA to adapt swiftly to take account of the changes to learning and teaching methods. QAA immediately established a task group to look at the issues affecting the sector and worked closely with student bodies, regulators, funding bodies, and sector-wide organisations throughout the UK as advice and guidance was developed. QAA Scotland staff contributed extensively to this work and participated in UK-wide, European and international activities and events - sharing practice and learning from other countries. With most university activity being moved online, QAA worked to support the sector to maintain high standards of learning and teaching, while also continuing its review activity as much as possible. In April 2020, QAA Scotland published a letter to the sector which reflected on the initial impact of the pandemic on the sector and outlined QAA's response on how quality arrangements would continue.

The following content will review QAA's activity of 2019–20 from before and after the pandemic outbreak.

Review processes

Enhancement-led Institution Review (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. There were six reviews planned for 2019–20, and we completed the reviews for the University of the West of Scotland and the Edinburgh Napier University by March 2020 as scheduled. The four reviews scheduled for later in spring 2020 had to be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and were rescheduled for later in the year following consultation with the universities involved and the SFC. QAA made some minor amendments to the ELIR process to accommodate the ongoing pandemic, the most significant of which was that the review visit would be conducted entirely online. Summaries of the delayed ELIR reviews and their outcomes will be included in the 2020–21 QAA Scotland Annual Report.

“Working with QAA Scotland through various committees has been a fantastic opportunity to represent students at the sector-level and ensure the student voice shines through in discussions. QAA Scotland has carried out remarkable work in leading the sector in a student-focused, enhancement-led approach which has been incredible to be a part of. The end of the 2019–20 academic year saw universities making emergency responses to change their ways of working. QAA Scotland paved the way for supporting students during this time of ‘panicgogy’ through its leadership, support and development of crucial guidance that helped shape the sector’s immediate response.”

Alexander Hedlund
Vice-President Education at Heriot-Watt University Students’ Union

“I’m delighted the reviewers recognised the excellent work going on across a range of areas of our University. I’m particularly pleased the review highlighted our student-centred culture, commitment to widening access, to educational opportunities for all, and sector-leading learning and teaching innovations.”

Professor Craig Mahoney
Principal and Vice-Chancellor, University of the West of Scotland
Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR)

At the University of the West of Scotland, the ELIR team commended the University for its focus on learning, teaching and assessment activities which are designed to promote student success, and for making significant progress in improving the retention of students who enter from underrepresented groups. The University was also commended for having an increasingly sophisticated, integrated, transparent and widely-understood approach to using an extensive range of internal and external data to promote enhancement and inform decision-making and evaluation. It also received commendation for its student-centred culture, collaborative provision and widening access efforts.

Recommendations in the report included an encouragement to: improve the effectiveness of two-way communication between students and staff; ensure there is consistent support in place for all students irrespective of the host school or students’ location and mode of study; introduce a process to review the contribution of student-facing professional services to the quality of the student experience; and, continue with its plans to change the collaborative partnership model, taking full responsibility for all aspects of the student experience at the London Campus.

Edinburgh Napier University was commended for its strategic approach to widening participation; its support for developing students’ skills in employability, enterprise and entrepreneurship; its approach to monitoring postgraduate student academic progress; the systematic enhancement of leadership in learning, teaching and research; its clear partnership working between academic and professional services staff; the effective development available for academic and support services staff; and, the developing institutional approach to the use of data.

Recommendations for Edinburgh Napier included an encouragement to: ensure there are clear student representative structures in place at all levels and make sure there are effective arrangements in place for the recruitment, training and support for student representatives; continue to develop support mechanisms for online learners, graduate apprentices, transnational education students and other groups studying off campus; consider introducing a structured and longitudinal institution-wide induction for postgraduate research students; progress implementation of revisions to the institution-led review process; make external examiners’ reports accessible to all students; and, review the English language entry criteria and the proficiency of students on all transnational education programmes.

Institution-led Review (ILR)

While ELIR reviews may have been rescheduled for several institutions in the latter half of the academic year, ongoing quality monitoring and support was able to continue via the Institution-led Review (ILR) process. Institutions have the flexibility to design and manage ILR but they need to meet the expectations of the Quality Code and the guidance published by the SFC on quality for higher education institutions. During an ELIR, QAA examine how effective institutions ILR processes are.

ILR activities in Scotland continued to be thorough, providing institutions with assurance that academic standards are being achieved and that the quality of the student experience is high and continues to be enhanced. Of the 106 ILRs, 30 were rescheduled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. There were 48 reviews that took place prior to the pandemic restrictions coming into place in March 2020. For the 28 reviews that took place post-lockdown, institutions moved quickly to alter processes - sometimes in a matter of days. While some negative consequences of the pandemic on ILR were reported, such as bunching of review schedules in following years, some unexpected benefits were also emphasised, particularly linked to enhanced student engagement in the process. From the analysis of the ILR annual statements submitted by the sector, three areas were reported as predominantly positive practice - commitment of staff, student support, and learning and teaching practices. Two areas - staff and physical resources, and assessment and feedback to students - were identified predominantly for development.
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.

Session 2019-20 was the third and final year of the current Enhancement Theme - Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience. A successful element of this Enhancement Theme has been its collaborative cluster work, where a modest amount of funding is provided to enable groups of institutions to work together on topics of mutual interest for the benefit of all. Over the duration of 2019-20, QAA Scotland supported eight collaborative clusters. Outputs and outcomes varied according to the topic and are available as part of a body of some 165 resources, through the Theme webpages. We welcomed the added value that several of our Theme resources found in light of the pandemic, in particular the collaborative clusters:

- Developing a sense of belonging in online and distance learning
- Student mental wellbeing - creating inclusive curricula and learning environments
- Supporting widening participation with lecture capture
- Developing graduate support in Scotland.

In the final year of the current Theme, activity was primarily focused on evaluation and sharing learning about impact. As we moved our own work online, we made a rapid pivot to delivery of our planned June 2020 in-person conference to a wholly online event while also reviewing and adapting content. Learning from Disruption: Exploring what Counts in Higher Education, was a two-day event focused on the evidence and experiences gathered from a period of disruption and asked how this might shape future higher education design, delivery and the wider student experience. The conference attracted 383 delegates from 20 countries. The success of this event would lead to further online enhancement focused conferences being organised in the subsequent academic year.

To mark the conclusion of Evidence for Enhancement, QAA Scotland launched its Theme summary film, which showcased the quality and diversity of work undertaken across Scotland over the previous three years. An evaluation project, due to complete in 2021, was also commissioned by QAA to evaluate the overall impact and success of the Theme following its three years of activity.

“Over what has been an unprecedented year for the sector, QAA Scotland has continued to support student engagement across all their activities. From their aptly-timed ‘Focus On: Technology Enhanced Learning’ event, to their international conference - ‘Learning from Disruption: Exploring What Counts in Higher Education’ - QAA Scotland has strived to ensure students have been actively involved in, and benefitted from, the events and materials produced over the last 12 months. It has been great to see the key role students have played in contributing to and shaping the work of QAA Scotland, especially during such an significant time, and we’ve no doubt that the work accomplished over the last year will have a meaningful impact for years to come.”

Eve Lewis
Director of Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (sparqs)
Focus On

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).

In 2019-20, QAA Scotland delivered the Focus On project - Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) - in response to TEL being a recurring theme in ELIR 3 Outcome Reports and in early ELIR 4 cycle reviews. This proved to be a timely activity as it supported the sector through its pivot to emergency online learning following the outbreak of COVID-19. Along with an online event on 1 April 2020, QAA Scotland published an extensive Resource Hub full of practice and tips on using technology in learning and teaching. The Resource Hub includes ‘Focus On Diaries’ - a new series of short, reflective videos exploring the pivot to digital learning and teaching in 2020.

Continued stakeholder engagement

Despite the effects of the pandemic, QAA continued its regular liaison meetings with colleagues in the Scottish Government, SFC and others, keeping them updated on how QAA and the sector were maintaining quality in rapidly changing circumstances. 2019–20 also saw QAA hold meetings with new education spokespeople from the Scottish Parliament, to ensure that all political parties in Scotland are aware of the role QAA plays in maintaining quality and supporting the student experience.

The Quality Arrangements for Scottish Higher Education (QASHE) group, which was jointly established by QAA and Universities Scotland in 2018-19, continued to be used effectively to discuss the impact on quality arrangements in Scotland resulting from discussions and decisions in other parts of the UK. The group has allowed Scottish sector stakeholders to have a clear understanding of the issues and allows a clear view of opinion from Scotland to be gathered, on matters such as degree algorithms, degree classification, the Teaching Excellence Framework and transnational education. 2019–20 saw the membership of the group expand further to include members from small specialist institutions, as well as data experts, to ensure the views around the table reflect the diversity and expertise of the Scottish higher education sector.
The arrival of COVID-19 in early 2020 has transformed the political, economic and social environment in which our universities operate. The challenges thrown up by this global pandemic continue as public health interventions, including mass vaccination programmes, seek to ameliorate its impact on communities throughout the world.

Within Scotland, the higher education sector has continued to deliver its core academic activities, embracing innovation and responding to the unfolding challenges with agility and resilience. Collegiality and a commitment to offering support to one another have, more than ever, characterised the work and enabled the completion of a number of important sector-wide initiatives. These have included the 2017-20 Enhancement Theme - Evidence for Enhancement; Enhancement-led Institutional Reviews (ELIR); the 2019-20 Focus On project - ‘Technology Enhanced Learning’; as well as ensuring a strong sector voice in quality discussions at UK level.

Looking ahead to 2020-21, the sector will complete the ELIR 4 cycle of reviews; begin its new Enhancement Theme - Resilient Learning Communities; and work closely with the SFC on its review of provision. As we emerge from lockdown and other COVID-19-related restrictions, QAA Scotland’s commitment to working collaboratively with stakeholders and partners within Scotland, the UK and internationally will once again be critical to the success of the sector.

As Chair of the QAA Scotland Advisory Committee, I look forward to working with the team to ensure Scotland’s distinctive enhancement-based approach to quality continues to evolve to meet the new challenges and opportunities of 2021.
## Our year in numbers

### Twitter

- **@QAAScotland**
  - 1,346 Followers at end of year
  - ↑ +23% from previous year

- **@THEMESTweets**
  - 3,947 Engagements for year
  - ↑ +15% from previous year

- 1,503 Followers at end of year
  - ↑ +18% from previous year

### LinkedIn

- 272 Followers at end of year
  - ↑ +143% from previous year

### Youtube

- 9,058 views
- 428.2 hours
- ↑ 39% increase of subscribers from previous year

### Quality Enhancement Newsletter

- 1,823 Total recipients

### QAA Scotland website

- 40,752 Pageviews
  - ↑ +21% from previous year

- 21,068 Sessions
  - ↑ +34% from previous year

- 14,583 Users
  - ↑ +32% from previous year

### Referrals to website from social sites

- **Twitter**
  - 615 sessions
  - 915 pageviews

- **Facebook**
  - 220 sessions
  - 246 pageviews

- **LinkedIn**
  - 130 sessions
  - 194 pageviews

- 2,660 Document downloads