Introduction

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QAA Director for Scotland

In last year’s annual report, I reflected upon the unprecedented times we found ourselves in, and how we had responded. After another year of disruption, change and a roller coaster ride, I am in danger of repeating myself.

However, that would be a disservice to everyone reading this report. We have all learned so much, changed our thinking in ways that would have taken years in a so called ‘normal’ time, but held true to what is important to us all - student achievement and experience.

As you will read later in this report, QAA continued to deliver the ELIR 4 programme, but in an online way. That took adaptation from both QAA and institutions, but feedback demonstrated that it was a successful shift even in the face of increased workload for institutions and their staff. We had to deliver some difficult messages through the year, but what this did do was demonstrate that where practice was below what we all would expect, the ELIR process was robust enough to identify this, and crucially, done in a way that is focused on supporting enhancement.

Talking of enhancement, the new Enhancement Theme, Resilient Learning Communities, launched and had a very successful first year with great engagement from institutions and agencies. A significant number of highly relevant and important projects produced some great insights and helpful toolkits and guides to address common challenges. It is such a huge strength of the sector in Scotland that everyone works so collegiately and cooperatively for the common good, and that students are always at the heart of it all.

The thematic review of digital provision in light of the pandemic was an important signpost into the role QAA can and does play in evaluating changes to practice and highlighting good practice for all. The wealth of innovation across the sector, and beyond, is an important resource to help everyone improve and develop.

For QAA it was a very busy year, matching the demands that were placed on institutions and staff. It was a privilege to work as part of a partnership, and to play our part in the success of Scottish higher education.
Our work in 2020-21

Key highlights

For QAA Scotland, highlights of our work show our impact within Scotland and beyond. In 2020-21 these include:

- Successful delivery of the fourth year of the ELIR 4 cycle.
- Launching a new sector-wide Enhancement Theme, Resilient Learning Communities. Planning for major activity evaluating 20 years of the Enhancement Themes is also underway.
- Successfully hosting an online International Enhancement Conference, with over 400 delegates from 26 countries participating.
- Proactively engaging with the SFC Review on Coherent Provision and Sustainability, and researching ways that quality enhancement processes in HE and FE can complement each other more in the future.
- Successfully developing and delivering agreed programmes of review and enhancement activity.
- Continuing to strengthen the relationships between review and enhancement activities for the benefit of the sector in Scotland and contributing to the sustained integrity of Scotland’s Quality Enhancement Framework and the continued evolution of partnership working across the sector.
- 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 HE and QAA Scotland (within the wider context of UK HE and QAA UK).
- Continuing to be responsive to changes in the UK’s quality landscape and to international developments in quality assurance and enhancement.
- Continuing to provide guidance and support to the sector across the UK related to responding to challenges arising from the COVID pandemic. This has included publications available on the QAA website, webinars and other events for institutions, and meetings with key stakeholders such as PSRBs and senior university staff from across the UK.
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. 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 was 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 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 make it easier for UK providers to operate in other countries and for UK graduates to work globally. See page 13 for more information about how QAA delivers responsive quality assurance across the UK.

QAA is a full member of the European Association of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA) and listed on the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). Following the very successful review of QAA by ENQA earlier in 2018, QAA’s continued listing on the EQAR was confirmed in autumn 2018. QAA will be subject to a further review early in 2023.

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. Since 2003, the work of QAA Scotland has been guided by the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), which 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 Scottish Funding Council (SFC) summarising these activities for the whole Scottish higher education sector.

**Student engagement in quality**

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 co-leadership of the Enhancement Themes, and as 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.
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.

In session 2020–21, COVID–19 continued to impact on Scottish higher education delivered in Scotland and across the globe. We acknowledge the enormous efforts of staff and students across another difficult 12 months. Key quality processes such as Institution-led Review have shown that academic standards are being achieved and that the quality of the student experience is high and continues to be enhanced.

In Autumn 2020, four ELIR reviews were completed which were deferred from 2019–20 following the initial outbreak of the pandemic. The ELIR methodology was adapted to allow for an online institutional review and was shared with review teams and institutions involved. A further three ELIR reviews took place in Spring 2021, with two of those having their reports published in the 2021–22 academic year. As QAA approaches the end of this ELIR cycle, there are plans to evaluate the method in 2021–22 ahead of the next cycle.

Summary of ELIR findings in 2020–21

This section provides a brief summary of some of the key points from the five ELIR reports which were published in the 2020–21 academic year.

**University of St Andrews** was commended for its achievements in many areas, including its partnership working and responsiveness to the student voice; its dedicated commitment to increasing access, diversity and inclusion; its systemic approach to enhancement underpinned by established quality processes that strengthen the link between pedagogical research and teaching practice; its prioritisation of student wellbeing, particularly regarding mental health; and its provision of an excellent overall student learning experience that contributes to a strong sense of belonging among students and staff.

“In a year where the sector has had to continuously adapt its approaches to learning, teaching and quality, QAA Scotland has successfully preserved the central role of students in the development and focus of its activities, events and materials. During the first year of the new Enhancement Theme, sparqs and QAA Scotland co-facilitated the Student-Led Project (SLP) on the theme of Digital Student Communities. The positive feedback from students involved in the project attests to QAA Scotland’s genuine commitment to, and support of, student-led activity, and the project’s culminating output – a half day best-practice sharing event – was a sector benefit for both students and staff across Scotland.

Across the breadth of QAA Scotland’s work in 2020–21, including as reviewers in ELIR 4, attendees at the online International Enhancement Conference, and as key stakeholders in the development of guidance for institutions during COVID-19, students have been valued contributors, beneficiaries and partners.”

Eve Lewis
Director of Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (sparqs)
The ELIR report also made recommendations including asking the University to develop more effective oversight of the training and support provided at school level to postgraduate research students (PGRs) who teach; to continue developing and implementing systems to monitor staff engagement with mandatory areas of training and support; to ensure that all students have easy access to external examiners’ reports for their programme of study by the end of academic year 2020–21; and to implement the University’s intended approach to sharing a final analysis of degree classification with external examiners and asking them to reflect on the distribution patterns when submitting their final reports from 2020–21.

**Heriot-Watt University** was commended for practice including its strong institutional vision, strategy and leadership to engender a sense of global community in its national and international campuses; for its clear commitment from senior leadership to the implementation of the Learning and Teaching Strategy; and for the mutual respect between senior management and student officers leading to increasing effective student representation and in turn effective enhancement of the student learning experience.

The ELIR report also made recommendations including asking the University to implement an institutional approach to the use of data that is systematic and accessible; to engage proactively and work in partnership with postgraduate research students to identify ways to improve their sense of belonging in the University community alongside developing a consistent institution-wide postgraduate research student environment; and to ensure equity of access to staff development opportunities across all campuses.

**Glasgow Caledonian University** was commended for practice such as its clearly articulated and embedded strategy and vision; the long-standing, embedded, and collaborative relationship between the University and the GCU Students’ Association which is based on genuine and effective partnership working across all aspects of university life; and the long-standing commitment to widening participation which has made significant progress in embedding equality, diversity and inclusion in all aspects of university life.

The ELIR report also made recommendations including to continue to work with students to address the improvements in policy and practice they would like to see around consistency in both the quality and timeliness of assessment feedback. The University was also asked to further reflect on ways it can streamline its quality assurance and enhancement processes to provide greater discipline focus and deliver more effective ways of promoting enhancement.

**The University of Edinburgh** was commended for practice including working in close partnership with the student body, exemplified by student involvement across all decision-making structures and university initiatives, as well as for the promotion and expansion of the Student Association–led and University supported Peer Assisted Learning Schemes (PALS) which contributed to the integration of students as they join the University. The University’s Institute for Academic Development was commended for providing responsive, reflective and proactive university-level support for teaching, learning and researcher development.
The ELIR report also made recommendations including to establish a systematic approach to enable effective institutional oversight and evaluation of the implementation of policy and practice; to develop an effective approach to the strategic leadership and management of change that will ensure more immediate and timely implementation of identified solutions in order to support staff and enhance the student experience; and to prioritise the development of a holistic and strategic approach to the design and management of assessment and feedback.

“The review process provided an important opportunity for University-wide reflection and, with the expert input from the review team, we have a clear plan for further development and enhancement of the learning experience for our students.”

Professor Tina Harrison
Assistant Principal, Academic Standards and Quality Assurance, The University of Edinburgh

Glasgow School of Art received commendation for its strategic and sustained commitment to widening access, through a variety of successful long-standing school and college partnerships and its student support services which have been particularly effective in supporting students with the move to online provision. It also received commendation for the technology support provided by staff and the good progress made in implementing a digital inclusion strategy to support students transition to a blended model of learning, as well as its progress towards decolonising the curriculum.

However, overall the review concluded that Glasgow School of Art had arrangements for managing academic standards and the student learning experience which are of limited effectiveness. In addition to this threshold judgement, the review made several recommendations such as avoiding over-reliance on individuals; continuing to embed effective arrangements for student representation; ensuring that processes align to the demands of curricula and the resources available to support students are effective and equitable; and ensuring that there are clearer expectations for feedback practice which are implemented effectively across the institution, so that all students receive timely, relevant and high-quality formative feedback on their progress. Following the review, QAA will work with the School to identify an appropriate date to conduct a re-review in 2022, to assess progress made on the recommendations.
Enhancement Themes

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.

2020–21 was the first year of the Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme and we completed 10 projects:

- Supporting student transitions in 2021-22
- Addressing the digital divide
- Digital student communities (Student-led Project)
- Scottish sector learning from Covid-19
- Student mental wellbeing within our BAME and LGBTQ+ learner communities
- Re-imagining resilience for taught postgraduate students
- Exploring the potential of micro-credentials and digital badging
- Programme leadership: strengthening resilience supporting learning communities
- Resilient academic leadership: an exploration within the principal fellow network
- Decolonising the curriculum in the time of pandemic

QAA has worked with Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (sparqs) on the student-led project in the Theme. In addition to supporting and contributing to the sector-wide and collaborative projects, institutions have been developing and implementing their own programmes of work. QAA’s analysis of institution’s reports on their year 1 activity identified around 80 projects which were underway and broadly relate to the following topics: definitions of resilience, transition points, peer-to-peer activity, belonging/community, digital provision, community outreach, student characteristics/populations, and subject/discipline-specific.

In November 2020, QAA hosted its three-day virtual International Enhancement Conference, Building Resilient Learning Communities: Using Evidence to Support Student Success. The conference explored how evidence can be used to help navigate rapidly changing external environments and strengthen diverse learning communities, drawing on practice from the most recent Enhancement Theme. Over 400 delegates from 26 countries participated, and recordings and resources from the conference are published on the Enhancement Themes website.

In spring 2021 we published our final major output from the 2017–20 Enhancement Theme. The report on evaluation and impact considered examples of achievements at institution and programme level, as well as in student support and engagement. Evaluation and impact continue to be a key focus of Enhancement Theme work. Building on the step change we made in evaluating the 2017-20 Theme, we are engaged in an exciting three-year odyssey that will evaluate 20 years of the Enhancement Themes as we reach that milestone in 2023. This significant and ambitious sector-wide activity will help us explore how, and to what extent, the Themes have impacted on the Scottish student experience as part of Scotland’s Quality Enhancement Framework (which will also be marking 20 years of operation), and in what ways this work has influenced enhancement approaches globally.

Considerable progress has been made in the past 12 months in reviewing previous completed Themes and developing capability to support evaluation of the current Enhancement Theme. We are really excited about the development of a Universal Evaluation Framework to support our future Theme evaluation activity.
Learning from the pandemic

QAA Scotland fulfilled a Scottish Funding Council (SFC) commission titled Digital Provision During the Ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic: A review of approaches and mechanisms employed by Scottish higher education institutions to assure the quality of the student learning experience and academic standards. This review, and the research involved, supported the production of a publication that QAA Scotland launched in September 2021, looking at Scottish Sector Learning from the COVID-19 Pandemic. It focused on identifying common practices and distinctive approaches to changes in discharging quality processes, and serves as both an historical record and a means to further understanding of the sector’s resilience in the face of challenge.

Continued stakeholder engagement

"QAA make me feel really empowered as they really seek out the student opinions on all the issues which results in constructive discussions. I feel like student views are not only represented, but truly reflected in the approach we take. QAA also provides great opportunity for institutions to collaborate and improve through various pieces of work and I believe it is making significant impact to our institution. The expertise we receive is truly invaluable!"

Ondrej Kukerak
Vice President Education, Aberdeen University Students’ Association

Despite the ongoing 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. 2020-21 also saw QAA hold meetings with the new Minister for Further and Higher Education at the Scottish Parliament, as well as with new members of the Scottish Parliament’s Education, Children and Young People Committee. This helps 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 2019, continued to be used as an effective forum to discuss the impact of quality arrangements on Scotland resulting from discussions and decisions from other parts of the UK. The group has allowed Scottish sector stakeholders to have a clear understanding of the issues affecting quality matters and allows a clear view of opinion from Scotland to be gathered.

We encourage stakeholders to sign up to the regular Quality Enhancement Newsletter for Scotland, and follow our profiles on social media to keep up to date about ongoing and future activity and opportunities for engagement with QAA Scotland.
Towards a tertiary system

2020-21 saw the Scottish Funding Council consultation on the future of tertiary education in Scotland. QAA responded to the consultation stating that it stands ready to support the sector as it continues to adapt to new teaching methods and develop new ways of operating across the tertiary education sector.

QAA Scotland is mindful of SFC and the Scottish Government’s ambitions to create a quality enhancement framework for a more tertiary approach to quality arrangements in Scotland. Currently QAA Scotland is taking forward a number of desk-based research activities to support it in its development of a new review method for the Scottish HE sector and has conducted an in-depth consultation involving colleagues from across the sector to review the ELIR method in 2021-22.

QAA is starting to develop closer links with the college sector in Scotland and is reaching out to teaching and learning practitioners through the current Enhancement Theme activity, seeking to involve college sector colleagues wherever appropriate in other enhancement activity. Our relationship and collaboration with colleges will develop as we seek to fulfil the outcomes of the SFC review. QAA Scotland is also learning from developments in Wales and Northern Ireland, as they too move towards developing new enhancement-focused systems of quality across the post-16 education landscape.
Looking forward

Professor John Sawkins
Chair of the QAA Scotland Strategic Advisory Committee

For the Scottish higher education sector, the year 2020-21 was once again shaped and disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Once again, however, it rose to the various challenges, delivering its core academic activities with characteristic innovation, agility and resilience.

A commitment to collaboration and partnership within a mature quality enhancement framework underpinned the delivery of a number of significant pieces of work during the year. These included: the continuation of the ELIR 4 cycle of institutional reviews, the launch of a new Enhancement Theme (Resilient Learning Communities) and the hosting of the annual International Enhancement Conference online with over 400 delegates from 26 countries in attendance.

QAA continued to support the sector in its response to the pandemic through publications, webinars and meetings with key stakeholder within and beyond the sector. Within Scotland, work continued to ensure our progressive Quality Enhancement Framework for higher education remained well attuned to changes in the UK’s quality landscape, and to international developments in quality.

Looking ahead to 2021-22, QAA Scotland will continue to work closely with Scottish Government, the Scottish Funding Council, Education Scotland and all providers as the new tertiary quality system is developed. The Enhancement Theme moves into its second year, looking at innovative ways to support students as society emerges from the pandemic. The Focus On programme will also return, with a programme entitled ‘Professional Services Partnership’.

As Chair of the QAA Scotland Advisory Committee, I look forward to working with the team ensuring Scotland’s distinctive enhancement-based approach to quality continues to evolve to meet the new challenges and opportunities of 2022.
Our year in numbers

Twitter
@QAAScotland
1477, Followers at end of year

@THEMEStweets
1626, Followers at end of year

LinkedIn
418 Followers at end of year

Quality Enhancement Newsletter
769 Total recipients

ET website
76,918 Page views
33,523 Sessions
20,862 Users

QAA Scotland website
39,686 Page views
21,492 Sessions
14,621 Users

Referrals to website from social sites

Twitter
574 sessions
814 page views

Facebook
220 sessions
243 page views

LinkedIn
136 sessions
167 page views

2775, Document downloads

Scottish Funding Council (SFC) is a non-departmental public body and the strategic body responsible for funding teaching and learning provision and research.

Quality assurance: The Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) is built on partnership and collective engagement. The 5 points of the QEF are: national Enhancement Themes, cyclical Enhancement-led institutional Review (ELIR), Institution-led reviews, student engagement and public information. Other activity includes Focus On projects learning from ELIR outcomes and sector-wide and thematic reporting.

SFC have announced plans to develop a new quality assurance and enhancement framework for the wider tertiary education system.

### Northern Ireland

Higher education a devolved matter. Political oversight by the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly.

Funds for higher education are directly provided by the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland.

Quality assurance: Operating under 2016 quality arrangements with the expectation of a move to a more enhancement-led model. Currently continuing with a system involving annual provider reviews.

### Wales


Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) is the Welsh Government Sponsored Body responsible for regulating the higher education sector. New Commission for Tertiary Education and Research expected to succeed HEFCW in coming years.

Quality assurance: Overall Quality Assessment Framework for Wales with QAA undertaking Quality Enhancement Reviews of regulated HE providers every six years while Gateway Quality Reviews of HE providers test new entrants against the baseline quality regulatory requirements and manage specific designation.