QAA
Scotland

An Overview of Quality and Enhancement Activity 2018–22 (ELIR 4 cycle)

September 2022

Contents

Executive summary

1   Scotland has 19 higher education institutions (HEIs) that vary in size, scope and mission. Since 2002, the sector's approach to quality has been enhancement-led, with enhancement defined as 'taking deliberate steps to bring about improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experiences of students'. Institutions and sector agencies, including QAA, are partners in a Quality Enhancement Framework[1] consisting of five interrelated elements:

- Enhancement Themes
- institution-led review
- student engagement in quality
- public information
- Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR).

2   ELIR is a cyclical peer-review method that aligns with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).[2] The fourth ELIR cycle took place in the period 2018-22. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the latter half of the cycle: it was extended by six months, and reviews that took place after March 2020 were conducted online. Of the 19 HEIs in Scotland, 18 were subject to an ELIR review - the exception being the Open University in Scotland for which different review arrangements apply.

3   This report is intended to offer an overview of the key matters learned from the ELIR 4 cycle in relation to current trends and areas for development in the Scottish higher education (HE) sector. The following text draws attention to a number of specific instances of positive practice identified in ELIR 4 reports of individual institutions. It is possible that additional practice takes place within the institutions subject to ELIR, but only those elements of practice included within the ELIR 4 reports are considered in this report.

4   There is evidence from the ELIR 4 reports of widespread positive practice in relation to approaches to the delivery of learning and teaching. Of the 18 reviews, 16 explicitly reference institutional employability strategies (paragraph 59), and while this represents continuity rather than development, there appears to be greater focus across the sector on offering work-related learning within the curriculum. There has also been a clear trend across the sector towards the use of technology (paragraphs 62-63) to support new forms of learning including: blended learning, lecture capture, videoconferencing for students, and the continuing development of virtual learning environments (VLEs) to support learning; in many cases this has been accompanied by support for staff to develop their skills in using such technology. It is reasonable to assume that the pandemic catalysed the use of technology, though there was no noticeable difference in commendations and recommendations relating to this topic pre and post-pandemic. The developing use of technology has been accompanied in many cases by the enhancement of study space for students (paragraphs 64-65); reports identify 15 institutions at which major developments in the creation of new or the refurbishment of existing study spaces have either recently taken place or are about to take place. However, consistency in the provision of learning resources remains an area for development at some institutions with multiple campuses.

5   The ELIR 4 reports identify clear trends towards yet greater widening of access into HE across the sector (paragraphs 50-51). Articulation agreements between HEIs and further

education colleges are now commonplace and serve to facilitate the smooth progression of students from underrepresented groups to HE, typically those from Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) 20/40 postcodes; many institutions additionally take steps to support the learning experience of such students after entering HE. Six institutions have implemented policies for contextualised admissions, enabling them to have greater regard to the circumstances of individual applicants in making admissions decisions.

6   In respect of the use of data in evaluation of the student experience (paragraphs 82-85), ELIR 4 reports identified a trend towards making data on student performance and achievement routinely available to academic or professional services staff in a form which enables evaluation and decision-making; as well as a move, at some institutions, to use sector benchmarks such as National Student Survey (NSS) outcomes and Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey data to inform evaluation alongside internal data. It is likely that *Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience*[3] - the 2017-20 Enhancement Theme - contributed to this sectoral shift. Alongside this positive practice, reports also identify, at some institutions, the need for consistency in the accessibility and coverage of data, and the need to use data to identify and address gaps in student attainment.

7   While some institutions are identified as taking positive steps to promote equality and diversity in the curriculum, others have not yet achieved wide awareness of issues relating to equality and diversity, and have not yet established processes to identify and address gaps in student achievement (paragraphs 40-41).

8   Reports confirm that institutional approaches to quality assurance and enhancement are generally robust. However, reports also draw attention to several institutions which do not yet have secure arrangements for the regular internal review of the work of professional support services (paragraph 78), and to areas for development at some institutions in the oversight of their collaborative provision (paragraphs 86-89).

9   In respect of supporting staff to deliver high-quality programmes (paragraphs 72-75), reports identified trends towards including 'excellence in teaching' in the criteria for staff promotion, and towards the creation of communities of practice to enable the sharing of ideas and practice among staff with common interests. Reports also identified that, in some institutions, further development work needs to be undertaken to ensure effective monitoring and the consistent uptake of development opportunities for staff.

10   All institutions offer opportunities to students for engagement in their student representative system (paragraphs 37-39). The ELIR 4 reports suggest that the increasingly diverse nature of student bodies and, in some cases, their wide geographical spread, means that consistently supporting opportunities for students to participate effectively as representatives - for instance, in relation to students studying online - or to students at campuses with only small student numbers requires creative approaches. A significant number of HEIs provided very effective training for students in these roles with a view to strengthening their contributions to quality assurance processes. Often this training is delivered in partnership with the students' association and/or sparqs.[4] This is reflective of the Scottish sector's long-term commitment to students as partners with a shared responsibility for quality.

11   Arrangements for student support (paragraphs 52-55) are, in general, a strength across the sector as shown by the number of commendations identified in reports. Actions being taken to further develop support systems show a trend towards provision of services

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[3] www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/completed-enhancement-themes/evidence-for-enhancement
[4] Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland

aimed at meeting particular needs - such as for students with specific learning needs - and for students entering later years of a programme under an articulation arrangement. While the provision of personal tutors for students is commonplace, the ELIR 4 reports indicate that some institutions need to undertake further work to establish consistent and well-understood systems for personal tutoring. The implementation of consistently high-quality practice in communicating with students about assessment of their work remains a matter for development across the sector.

12   A number of reports identified areas for development in respect of institutional strategy and policymaking (paragraphs 33-36). These typically relate to limitations in the institution's approach to aligning policy and practice with overall strategy, or to communicating policy within the institution itself.

Enhancement-led Institutional Review

13   The fourth cycle of Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) of Scottish HEIs took place in the period 2018-22.

Table 1: Institutions included in this report

The institutions included in this report are:	
University of Aberdeen	University of the Highlands and Islands
Abertay University	Queen Margaret University
University of Dundee	Robert Gordon University
University of Edinburgh	Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
Edinburgh Napier University	Scotland's Rural College
University of Glasgow	University of St Andrews
Glasgow Caledonian University	University of Stirling
Glasgow School of Art	University of Strathclyde
Heriot-Watt University	University of the West of Scotland

14   Reviews took place according to the method described in the Enhancement-led Institutional Review Handbook[5] (published April 2017). QAA Scotland also provided a brief guide to the ELIR method[6] to supplement the Handbook, and operational guidance intended to assist institutions in preparing for Enhancement-led Institutional Review.[7]

15   The ELIR 4 method was developed by QAA Scotland with the support of an External Institutional Review Advisory Group comprising members from the sector with experience of being reviewed and being reviewers, including student reviewers. The method was designed with a view to maximising the value of the exercise to individual institutions

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[5] www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review/handbook-and-guidance
[6] www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/reports/brief-guide-to-elir-method.pdf
[7] www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/reviewing-he-in-scotland/preparing-for-enhancement-led-institutional-review.pdf

and to the sector, building on the strength of support for ELIR to continue being enhancement-led, and acknowledging the importance placed on evidence-based self-evaluation.

16   ELIR 4 had a focus on the institution's strategic approach to enhancement as implemented at multiple levels within the institution and manifesting itself as continuous improvement and/or more significant step-changes in policy and practice.

17   ELIR 4 enabled a range of outcomes to be achieved. It was intended to promote holistic, evidence-based evaluation by institutions and the opportunity to engage in discussion on the outcomes of that evaluation with a team of peers. It delivered a clear statement on baseline quality and academic standards, and beyond that provided a suite of differentiated commendations and recommendations for each institution. It also enabled whole-sector enhancement and developmental activity to be conducted, drawing on thematic information about strengths and areas for development of the institutions reviewed.

18   The method was designed to enable effective review of institutions which are diverse in size, in scope and in mission. These include large universities with discipline coverage which is comprehensive in scope, universities with multiple campuses across Scotland and outwith Scotland, as well as specialist institutions with relatively small student numbers. Not all institutions have degree awarding powers - for example, awards from Glasgow School of Art are validated by the University of Glasgow, and awards from Scotland's Rural College by the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh. In addition, many institutions have collaborative partnerships with further education colleges which deliver programmes leading to awards of the university concerned; in some cases these partnerships involve student numbers which form a significant proportion of the institution's student body.

19   The scope of ELIR 4 included all of each institution's credit-bearing provision, irrespective of level, mode or location of study. This included: undergraduate and postgraduate students; taught and research students; full-time and part-time students, including those involved in credit-bearing continuing professional development. The scope also included collaborative provision, such as through partnership with a further education college, or transnational education delivered through a partnership with an institution in another country.

20   Each review was informed by the institution's Reflective Analysis (RA), submitted to QAA Scotland in advance of the review, and intended to act as a demonstration of the institution's capacity for self-reflection and critical evaluation. Students were expected to be involved in preparing the RA. In addition, institutions were required to submit an Advance Information Set (AIS) in order to provide the ELIR team with direct access to information about the institution's key processes for securing academic standards and assuring quality at an early stage in the review.

21   The ELIR method was based on review by peers; reviewers were drawn from staff and students at HEIs within and beyond Scotland. Reviews were carried out by teams of reviewers; each team included at least one student reviewer, at least two UK-based academic reviewers, and a coordinating reviewer. Institutions could also opt to have an international reviewer to bring an added external perspective to the ELIR team's consideration of the institution's approach to quality assurance and the enhancement of the student learning experience. International reviewers were selected based on their expertise and experience, with the aim of achieving a suitable match to the strategic approach and enhancement priorities of the institution. Review teams visited the institution on two occasions: a one-day Planning Visit and a subsequent Review Visit lasting between three and five days.

22   The effectiveness of student engagement was a significant focus of ELIR. It has been established practice across the sector that students should be partners in the formulation, operation and evaluation of the institution's approach to enhancement. ELIR reviews explore the extent and effectiveness of that partnership and the approach which institutions take to engaging students in their own learning.

23   QAA Scotland is responsible for managing the Scottish Enhancement Themes,[8] which aim to improve the learning experience of students studying within the Scottish HE sector. The sector achieves this by identifying and agreeing a specific area to work on (known as a Theme) with the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC) playing a key role in this process. Enhancement Themes involve the whole HE sector in Scotland, and staff and students collaborate on one or more topics to improve strategy, policy and practice relating to the student experience. Each Theme also allows the sector to share and learn from current and innovative national and international practice. Enhancement Themes typically run for three years, and the ELIR 4 cycle has spanned two Themes: *Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience* (2017-20) and *Resilient Learning Communities* (2020-23). Institutions were required to reflect on their engagement with the Enhancement Themes as part of the ELIR method.

24   QAA Scotland also manages Focus On,[9] a shorter and more targeted programme of enhancement and development work that allows the sector to respond to the outcomes of ELIR in a timely and practical manner. Focus On projects aim to help institutions and students' associations with work across key priority areas, and topics are chosen in liaison with SHEEC. Focus On provides an opportunity to create developmental resources and events with which the whole sector can get involved, with the aim of supporting colleagues to make a real difference in a short space of time. Three Focus On projects have coincided with the ELIR 4 cycle: Graduate Skills (2018-19), Technology-Enhanced Learning (2019-20), and Professional Services Partnerships (2021-22). Focus On was paused during session 2020-21 to allow for other activities more directly related to supporting the sector during the pandemic.

ELIR 4 outcomes

25   ELIR 4 reports provide evidence about trends in the Scottish HE sector. They constitute a rolling evidence base rather than a controlled study, with a different set of institutions being reviewed in each year and each review deliberately taking account of the institution's distinctive mission and student population.

26   The outcome of each review was a judgement on the effectiveness of the institution's arrangements for managing academic standards and the student learning experience. Judgements contain two elements:

- a clear statement on the effectiveness of the institution's arrangements for quality and academic standards (the threshold or baseline judgement)
- a suite of differentiated outcomes identifying good practice (commendations) and areas where the institution was asked to improve, or to review its approach (recommendations).

27   The method employed three categories of effectiveness for the threshold judgement, namely that the institution's arrangements for ensuring quality and academic

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[8] www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk
[9] www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/focus-on

standards were effective, or were of limited effectiveness, or were not effective. The full definitions for these categories are set out in the ELIR Handbook (see link at paragraph 14).

28   Where there was an overarching judgement in the effective category, ELIR teams were allowed to identify priority action that they considered the institution should take.

29   The findings of the review of each institution are detailed in the published ELIR 4 reports.[10] In each case, these take the form of an Outcome Report and a supporting Technical Report. Outcome Reports are short and are written for an informed lay audience. They set out the threshold judgement, the differentiated commendations and recommendations, and provide brief information about the nature of the institution. Technical Reports contain the detailed findings from the review and are written primarily for the institution reviewed. ELIR 4 reports are contextualised to the main themes of the review, but all Technical Reports are structured to cover five broad areas of institutional activity:

- contextual information about the institution, student population and the review
- approach to enhancing the student learning experience
- strategy and practice for enhancing learning and teaching
- academic standards and quality processes
- collaborative provision.

30   In addition to the Outcome and Technical Reports, QAA Scotland undertakes ongoing thematic analysis of ELIR findings. Outputs from this activity include this report along with Thematic Reports on specific topics. Topics are usually selected on the basis of the frequency with which they are appearing in commendations and recommendations, and Thematic Reports can help strengthen sector understanding and support development activity. During the ELIR 4 cycle, QAA Scotland developed a new analytical resource, the ELIR Knowledge Base. This takes the form of an Excel spreadsheet that can be downloaded from the ELIR webpage.[11] It contains all content from ELIR 4 Outcome and Technical Reports and allows users to search and filter this content. This innovation has supported QAA Scotland in its thematic analysis of the ELIR 4 cycle and allows for the quick identification of good practice on any topic.

31   Having reviewed the Outcome Reports, we can confirm that all but one of the institutions reviewed were maintaining effective arrangements for securing academic standards and assuring the student learning experience. In one institution, the arrangements were found to be of limited effectiveness, indicating that the quality of the student learning experience and the academic standards of the awards it offers, would continue to be placed at risk if it did not take action. In consequence of this outcome, the institution concerned has since developed an action plan as its response to issues identified in the review, is undertaking quarterly liaison visits by QAA Scotland, and has been subject to a follow-up review in June 2022. The outcomes of this re-review process were published on QAA's website on 26 August 2022.

32   Tables 2 and 3 below present the ELIR 4 outcomes in respect of commendations and recommendations in broad categories that are common across the sector. The tables list the frequency with which a particular category was identified across all the reports.

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[10] www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review/elir-reports
[11] www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review

Table 2: ELIR 4 commendations

Commendations	Frequency
Admissions and widening participation	9
Assessment	1
Collaborative partnerships	3
COVID-19 arrangements	1
Enhancement strategy	5
Enhancement practice	3
Equality and diversity	5
Strategy, policy-setting and communication	4
Learning resources	3
Postgraduate research	3
Quality Assurance Framework	6
Quality assurance: Institution-Led Review	4
Quality assurance: Use of data	3
Staff support	7
Student development	11
Student engagement	11
Student support	13
Teaching and learning	10

Table 3: ELIR 4 recommendations

Recommendations	Frequency
Admissions and widening participation	1
Appeals and complaints	1
Assessment: Examining boards	2
Assessment practice	6
Assessment feedback	6
Collaborative partnerships	8
Enhancement	1
Equality and diversity	2
Strategy, policy-setting and communication	14
Learning resources	1
Postgraduate research	12
Quality processes: External examining	3
Quality Assurance Framework	2
Quality assurance: Institution-Led Review	8
Quality assurance: Use of data	5
Staff support	7
Student development	6
Student engagement	12
Student support	7
Teaching and learning	4

Institutional strategy and policy-setting

33   With one exception, institutions had clear strategic plans to guide their overall future development, underpinned by operational plans for the implementation of strategic priorities. In identifying strategic goals, ELIR 4 reports typically refer to increasing internationalisation, excellence in research, and enhancing the student experience among the goals of many institutions.

34   The exception was Glasgow School of Art which, following the damage to its premises caused by fires in 2014 and 2018, had in place only annual operational plans to ensure continuity of service until the adoption of a new strategic plan; at the time of the ELIR review in 2020 a new strategic plan was being developed for the period to 2025.

35   In nine institutions, ELIR 4 reports made recommendations relating to strategy, policy-setting and communication. These recommendations typically arise from the identification of limitations in the institution's approach to aligning policy and practice with overall strategy, or to communicating policy within the institution itself.

36   ELIR 4 reports indicate that all institutions take strategic approaches to enhancing learning and teaching. Approaches include: standalone learning and teaching strategies[12] or frameworks;[13] learning and teaching forming a key component of the institution's overall strategic plan;[14] and strategies to support specific areas of learning and teaching, such as portfolio development, portfolio delivery, learner engagement and learner support.[15] Two institutions[16] were refreshing their learning and teaching strategies at the time of their ELIR.

Student learning experience

Student engagement

37   There was strong evidence of widespread good practice in the involvement of students in securing and enhancing the quality of the learning experience, with 11 institutions being commended for some aspect of their arrangements. Several institutions have formalised the role of the student body in this respect. For instance, the Student Partnership Agreement at the University of Aberdeen has led to the implementation of a Student Engagement Development Plan with clear targets for achieving its aims, and to the establishment of a network of communication champions across the university's schools and professional services. At the University of Strathclyde, the Student Experience Committee, chaired by the Student President and reporting to the Senate, provides the student community with a formal and direct forum for proposing and informing developments and enhancement priorities. The University of the West of Scotland also has a Student Experience Committee whose remit includes reviewing the impact of professional services. The Committee is co-chaired by the Students' Union President and the Vice-Principal (Learning, Teaching and Students), a feature that the ELIR team considered to be good practice.

38   While student partnership in institutional quality assurance processes is an integral element of the Scottish sector, there is a positive trend towards strengthening student

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[12] Abertay University, University of Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian University, Glasgow School of Art, Heriot-Watt University, University of the Highlands and Islands, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling
[13] Robert Gordon University, University of Strathclyde
[14] University of Aberdeen, University of Dundee, University of Edinburgh, Queen Margaret University, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
[15] Scotland's Rural College
[16] Edinburgh Napier University, University of the West of Scotland

contributions by providing training for their roles. Queen Margaret University offers training to student panel members for the approval, monitoring and periodic review of its programmes and systematically evaluates and improves this training; at the University of Edinburgh, there is a competitive process for the selection of students for participation in the University's Internal Periodic Review, and students selected to participate within these reviews are provided with comprehensive training.

39   All institutions offer opportunities to students for participation in their student representative systems, in keeping with well-established practice in the Scottish HE sector. Due to the increasingly diverse nature of student bodies and, in some cases, their wide geographical spread, providing consistent opportunities for students to participate effectively as representatives (for instance, in relation to students studying online, or to students at campuses with only small student numbers) is an area for development. Review teams heard about different approaches, including the system of Campus Councils employed by Scotland's Rural College.

Equality and diversity

40   All institutions continue to take steps to recognise and respond to diversity in the student population and to promote equality, representing a positive trend. At the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, where the promotion of equality and diversity formed one of the pillars of its strategic plan, there is a fund to provide financial support for student work which addresses issues relating to equality and diversity. The University of Glasgow and Glasgow School of Art require Equality Impact Assessments to be undertaken as part of their programme approval processes, while at Glasgow Caledonian University, progression and retention data provide evidence of the success of the Trans Student Policy and the Gender and Race Equality action plan. Abertay University's 'Lead Voices' programme provides support for students in minority groups, including students with caring responsibilities and for autistic students. At the University of St Andrews, a majority of staff have taken its Unconscious Bias module as part of its work to address attainment gaps between students of different ethnicities.

41   In some institutions, enhancement work continues in order to ensure that there is awareness of issues relating to equality and diversity, that developing practice is shared and embedded across the institution, and that gaps in student achievement are identified and addressed. This is therefore an area for development.

Impact of COVID-19

42   The national UK lockdown in March 2020, caused by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, occurred midway through the ELIR 4 cycle of reviews. By that time, nine of the total of 18 reviews had taken place.[17] The pandemic caused a pause in the planned sequence of reviews; no further reviews took place until November 2020, and the remaining nine reviews were carried out in the period to November 2021. ELIR 4 reports for the nine reviews carried out in 2020 and 2021 refer to institutions' arrangements for continuing to deliver their educational provision during the pandemic.

43   Despite the circumstances of the pandemic, there was no evidence of changes in the nature of judgements reached in reviews. In comparing reviews carried out before and after March 2020, for those institutions whose arrangements for ensuring quality and academic standards were found to be effective, our analysis shows that there was no

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[17] University of Aberdeen, University of Dundee, Edinburgh Napier University, University of Glasgow, Queen Margaret University, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Scotland's Rural College, University of Strathclyde, University of the West of Scotland

significant difference in the mean number of commendations and recommendations per review, and no significant difference in the mean number of commendations and recommendations per review relating to the areas of teaching, learning and assessment.

44   ELIR 4 reports for the nine institutions reviewed during the pandemic affirm that all took steps to adapt to online teaching (see also paragraphs 62-63). There is evidence in reports of positive practice by institutions in support of this adjustment, as well as of institutional preparedness in the availability and accessibility of the necessary technology for both students and staff. In response to the pandemic, Glasgow Caledonian University and Heriot-Watt University were able to accelerate existing plans for supporting online learning. The University of Edinburgh was able to expand its Virtual Classroom Policy to enable teaching staff to record lectures from home for later dissemination, and, at the time of its ELIR, was already taking steps towards adding subtitles to recordings of lectures.

45   Examples of additional support activities offered to students to support adaptation to the circumstances of the pandemic include: Abertay University's efforts to strengthen the sense of student community online through dedicated time, VLE space, and student mentors; the University of Edinburgh's training for student representatives in effective online engagement with students; and enhanced support for care experienced students transitioning into study at Glasgow Caledonian University. The Technical Report relating to the review of the University of the Highlands and Islands notes steps taken by the institution to address digital poverty; similar practice is likely to be widespread and was catalysed by the pandemic (for example, many institutions reported anecdotally that they had used emergency funding from the Scottish Funding Council to purchase laptops and wi-fi dongles for students).

46   At all institutions, existing VLEs play a large part in supporting online learning; the reports for the University of Stirling and for Abertay University draw attention in particular to the positive views expressed by students about the institutions' use of the VLE to support their learning during the pandemic.

47   ELIR 4 reports show that institutions made alterations to forms of assessment during the period of the lockdown in efforts to ensure that students were not disadvantaged. Heriot-Watt University replaced about 80% of examinations with alternative forms of assessment; the University of Stirling saw its move to online delivery as a catalyst to reduce its reliance on summative assessments and to consider opportunities for more formative assessments and new forms of feedback. It is likely that, in many of these cases, such alterations represent enhancements to assessment practice and will be retained post-pandemic.

48   Institutions generally recognised the need to support teaching staff in adapting rapidly to online teaching and provided resources to enable this. Examples of positive practice identified in ELIR 4 reports included: at the University of Stirling, the work of a team of learning technologists who assisted teaching staff with the effective use of technology in preparing for online teaching; Glasgow School of Art addressing a perceived deficit in staff skills in the use of online platforms by acquiring new software to enable a move to online learning, by providing remote access to course-specific software, and by providing software licences for students to work at home; Abertay University providing written guidance, templates and workshops tailored to the needs of staff in each of its divisions; and Robert Gordon University supporting staff through an online forum and online seminars to share good practice, and enhanced resources to support the switch to online learning.

49   In addition, many institutions introduced temporary changes to quality assurance processes in order to allow more staff time to be spent on teaching and learning activities. For instance, in 2019-20, Heriot-Watt University introduced an expedited process for

approving changes to provision being adapted for online learning and adopted a revised process for annual monitoring; the ELIR report nevertheless found that the University fulfilled its core requirements in relation to assuring quality and standards during this period. Through regular (including informal) conversations with institutions, QAA Scotland officers have learned that certain adaptations made to quality assurance processes in response to the pandemic have proved to be enhancements (for example, moving institution-led review processes online can make them more accessible and facilitate student engagement). As with adaptations made to teaching and assessment, we would therefore expect some of these changes to be retained post-pandemic.

Admissions and widening participation

50   Articulation agreements between HEIs and FE colleges are commonplace in the sector and have often been created in order to facilitate the progression of students from underrepresented groups to HE, typically those from SIMD20/40 postcodes. Many institutions additionally take steps to support the learning experience of such students after entering HE, representing a positive trend. At Glasgow Caledonian University, a dedicated team provides targeted support for care-experienced students, estranged students and young carers, with retention data showing evidence of the success of the institution's approaches. At Edinburgh Napier University, a range of initiatives support students transitioning from non-traditional routes, including a fully student-led programme, assisted by the University's Widening Participation team, to support students during their application and transition to the University.

51   Six institutions[18] have policies for contextualised admissions, enabling them to have greater regard to the circumstances of individual applicants in making admissions decisions. This is a positive trend. The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland has adjusted its contextualised admissions policy in order to recognise carers and care leavers in addition to applicants from SIMD postcodes. The introduction of a contextualised approach to admissions at the University of Aberdeen has led to increases in excess of 20% in the number of entrants from SIMD20/40 postcodes. At Edinburgh Napier University, the 15% increase in the number of offers made to students from SIMD20 postcodes following the introduction of a contextualised admissions policy, has been followed up by the establishment of dedicated widening participation student ambassadors and by effective partnership working between academic and professional services staff to support such students. However, a small number of institutions have recognised the requirement to undertake further development around enhancing the quality of data to enable evaluation of the effectiveness of steps taken to recruit and retain students from a range of backgrounds. This includes more granular data relating to applicants' backgrounds and experience, and better-quality student progression data.

Student support

52   Nine institutions[19] were commended for aspects of the support they provide for students, testifying to high levels of support both for student's academic development and their welfare. Descriptions of actions being taken to further develop support systems show a trend towards provision of services aimed at meeting particular needs; examples include the programme dedicated to the development of academic writing skills at the University of Glasgow; the strategic approach to supporting international students at Heriot-Watt

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[18] University of Aberdeen, Edinburgh Napier University, University of Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian University, Queen Margaret University, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
[19] University of Aberdeen, University of Glasgow, Glasgow School of Art, University of Edinburgh, Heriot-Watt University, University of the Highlands and Islands, Scotland's Rural College, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling

University and at the University of St Andrews; the targeted support for students entering from colleges into later years of study at the University of Dundee; the peer-assisted learning scheme at the University of Edinburgh; the online resources available to students prior to entry at the University of the Highlands and Islands; and the support available at Abertay University and at the University of Strathclyde for autistic students to progress to employment.

53   While the provision of personal tutors for students is commonplace across the sector, the ELIR 4 reports that some institutions need to make enhancements to their approaches and ensure students have consistent and well-understood personal tutoring arrangements, with seven institutions receiving recommendations with respect to this from their ELIR teams. This is therefore an area for development.

54   Several reports refer to increases in numbers of students suffering from poor mental health during their time in HE. Out of 18 reports, 15 indicate that the subject of student mental wellbeing was discussed during the review, demonstrating that there is widespread awareness of this issue (brought into sharper focus during the pandemic and especially during national lockdowns), and that institutions are working hard to support students. Examples of actions taken in this regard include the creation of dedicated counselling and mentoring services, mental health first aid training for staff, 24-hour telephone support services, mental health awareness weeks, peer-led mental health awareness programmes, and online mindfulness sessions. In particular, the University of St Andrews was commended for the steps taken to address students' mental wellbeing, by means of its Mental Health Toolkit alongside its Student Mental Health Agreement.

55   It is common for institutions to enable postgraduate research students to undertake some teaching of undergraduate students. While this can represent a valuable opportunity for professional development, the support provided to postgraduates who teach remains an area for development at seven institutions. It is worth noting here that this was also an issue during the ELIR 3 cycle. The postgraduate student experience has been the subject of Thematic Reports during both cycles, and *The Postgraduate Research Student Experience* was the topic of a Focus On project during ELIR 3, with support for postgraduates who teach a specific strand of that project.[20]

Assessment and feedback

56   The judgements, in every case but one, that institutions have effective arrangements for managing academic standards supports the view that, in general, arrangements for the assessment of students' work are rigorous. That rapidly-developed changes to some assessment practices introduced at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic took place without detriment to academic standards, is a tribute to the diligence and integrity of staff and was viewed positively by ELIR teams. Examples include the accelerated introduction of electronic assessments and alternative assessments at Glasgow Caledonian University, and the engagement of students as partners in the University of the Highlands and Islands' decision-making on adjustments to assessment and award criteria. However, it is clear that within the broad area of assessment and feedback there remain specific areas for development.

57   10 institutions received recommendations relating to a perceived lack of clarity in information provided to students about assessment processes, areas for development in grading systems used in assessments, and inconsistent practice in the provision of feedback on assessment which is timely and of high quality. At several of these institutions there was

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[20] www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/focus-on/the-postgraduate-research-(pgr)-student-experience/training-and-support-for-postgraduate-students-who-teach-(pgwt)

evidence of steps already under way to address such matters. Nevertheless, data from the National Student Survey supports the view that the implementation of consistently high-quality practice in communicating with students about assessment of their work remains a longstanding area for development across the sector; responses across all institutions in Scotland show that in 2022, while 79% (80% in 2021) of respondents expressed satisfaction with the overall quality of their course, 65% (66% in 2021) were satisfied with arrangements for assessment and feedback, and 57% (59% in 2021) agreed with the statement that 'Feedback on my work has been timely'.

58   A Thematic Report published in 2016[21] indicated that during the ELIR 3 cycle this was highlighted as an area for development at 12 institutions, with the implementation of policy, scheduling of assessment, timeliness of feedback, and communication being common themes. In response, QAA Scotland instigated two Focus On projects on the topic: *Assessment and Feedback* (2014-15),[22] and *Feedback from Assessment* (2017-18).[23] As part of the latter, QAA Scotland conducted research into what can be learned from student-led teaching award nominations. We found that what students value about feedback can be grouped into three themes: the nature of feedback; the personal qualities of the teacher; and the support that accompanies the feedback. Further sector engagement with the findings of the 2017-18 project[24] is to be encouraged, since it would appear that they remain relevant in 2022.

Employability

59   All 18 institutions who participated in ELIR 4 have formed a strategy for the development of graduate attributes to support employment after graduation and have established a set of actions to further the strategy. It is likely that the Enhancement Themes have contributed to this, most recently *Student Transitions* (2014-17), but also *Graduates for the 21st Century* (2008-11) and as far back as *Employability* (2004), of which supporting Scottish HEIs in developing employability strategies was an explicit aim. While all but two reports specifically mention this, the ELIR 4 cycle confirms that the development of skills needed for employment has been embedded into the curricula of programmes of study across the sector, and that there is a positive trend towards providing opportunities for work placements, internships or other forms of work-related learning.

60   Reports identified a number of examples of commendable practice in respect of formalising and embedding such opportunities - for instance: at Edinburgh Napier University, where programme-led work-related activities, placement learning opportunities and entrepreneurial skills development supported the University's target of ensuring that all programmes include built-in work-related learning; and at the University of St Andrews whose Professional Skills Curriculum offers undergraduate and postgraduate students opportunities to access a range of employability training activities leading to recognition in the Higher Education Achievement Report. At the University of Strathclyde, the University of the West of Scotland and Heriot-Watt University, there is particular emphasis on providing opportunities for employment or work experience in other countries through the establishment of international mobility opportunities in these institutions. While reports show that the opportunities for the development of graduate attributes were generally well understood and welcomed by students, there was evidence in some institutions of opportunities for work-related learning being insufficient to meet the extent of student

[21] www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/reviewing-he-in-scotland/elir-technical-reports-assessment-feedback.pdf
[22] www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/focus-on/assessment-and-feedback
[23] www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/focus-on/feedback-from-assessment
[24] www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/focus-on/summary-report-and-area-for-discussion-student-led-teaching-awards.pdf

demand, particularly arising from the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on patterns of employment, representing an area for development.

Learning resources

61   ELIR 4 reports confirm that in the case of 14 institutions,[25] the review team was satisfied that there were appropriate arrangements for managing the quality of the learning environment, and also confirm student satisfaction with the learning resources available to them.

62   All institutions have been taking steps to establish and enhance the use of digital technology to support learning and teaching. While this positive trend has pre-dated the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has, in many cases, served to support, or has been driven by, the need to adapt to online delivery during the pandemic (see also paragraph 44). There has consequently been a clear trend across the sector towards the use of technology to support, for instance, blended learning, lecture capture, videoconferencing for students, and the continuing development of virtual learning environments to support learning. In many cases this has been accompanied by support for staff to develop their skills in using such technology; ELIR 4 reports at seven institutions[26] explicitly confirmed that such support has been provided.

63   ELIR 4 reports identify many examples of good practice in support of this trend, not limited to the provision of technological infrastructure itself but also to support provided to students to enable them to access and use technology. These include: work at the University of Edinburgh to enable subtitles to be added to recordings of lectures; the development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) at the University of Edinburgh and the University of Strathclyde; and the comprehensive support provided by the University of Aberdeen to students and staff in digital skills, university systems and software, and study skills, particularly through its Learner's Toolkit.

64   In the provision of study space for students, the majority of institutions have undertaken refurbishments of existing spaces or have created new spaces for learning and teaching; ELIR 4 reports identify 16 institutions at which major developments have either recently taken place or are about to take place, representing a positive trend. Examples include: the University of Stirling's redesign and redevelopment of its facilities, which effectively meets the diverse needs of students and staff, and also supports engagement with local communities; the development of the University of the West of Scotland's Lanarkshire campus, designed to act as a catalyst for pedagogic transformation; the pilot of the redevelopment of classrooms at Edinburgh Napier University into flexible learning spaces as a basis for influencing the strategic development of further learning spaces; the creation of Technology Enhanced Active Learning spaces at the University of Glasgow, allowing more collaborative and active ways of learning; and, at Abertay University, the creation of a Collaborative Learning Suite as a technology-enriched learning environment designed to support active and collaborative learning.

65   While reports show evidence of generally high levels of student satisfaction with their learning environments, institutions operating over multiple campuses have acknowledged this as an area which requires further and ongoing development in order

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[25] University of Aberdeen, Abertay University, University of Dundee, University of Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian University, Heriot-Watt University, University of the Highlands and Islands, Queen Margaret University, Robert Gordon University, Scotland's Rural College, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling, University of Strathclyde, University of the West of Scotland
[26] University of Aberdeen, Abertay University, University of Edinburgh, Queen Margaret University, Scotland's Rural College, University of Stirling, University of the West of Scotland

to ensure consistency of provision of learning resources to all students. ELIR 4 reports draw attention to this in respect of Heriot-Watt University in relation to its Borders Campus and its Dubai Campus (see paragraph 67); of the University of the West of Scotland in respect of its London Campus; and of Edinburgh Napier University in relation to its campuses across the city of Edinburgh.

Strategy and practice for enhancement

Strategic approaches to enhancement

66   All institutions have engaged positively with the national Enhancement Themes,[27] and ELIR 4 reports show evidence of their positive impacts on strategy, policy and practice development. Management of this activity is typically overseen by senior managers at institutional level or by institutional steering groups. There are extensive examples of the broader engagement of academic and professional staff, as well as students, at institutions through projects aimed at enhancing the quality of the student experience aligned with current Enhancement Themes. Examples include: the development of a digital strategy at Scotland's Rural College; baseline studies into data use by academic staff at the University of the West of Scotland; the embedding of the Student Experience Action Plan at Glasgow Caledonian University; regulatory and policy revisions for the experience of postgraduate students at the University of St Andrews; and the development of the First Year Experience at Glasgow School of Art. There also appears to have been a trend in the increased use of student interns to deliver Enhancement Themes projects and other work. The use of student interns formed part of the basis of a commendation received by the University of Strathclyde.

67   In ELIR 4 reports for 10 institutions,[28] there were commendations relating to the effectiveness of strategic approaches to enhancing the student experience. Examples related to: the strategic commitment to widening access at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and at the University of Aberdeen; the effectiveness and the breadth of student partnership at Glasgow Caledonian University and at Robert Gordon University; and the strategic approach to developing international and multi-campus provision and a sense of a global community at Heriot-Watt University.

68   While the sector shows evidence of substantial strengths in institutional approaches to enhancement of quality, ELIR 4 reports also identify areas for development at a small number of institutions relating to the embedding of enhancement strategies and the breadth of engagement and ownership across the institution.

Identifying and sharing good practice

69   Across the sector, there are widespread common approaches to identifying and sharing good practice to enhance the quality of learning and teaching. ELIR 4 reports show that at 15 institutions[29] the identification and dissemination of good practice is, in formal terms, led by a central organisation or committee within the organisation, typically with cross-institutional responsibility for developing and leading activities to further such dissemination. As an example of practice which is typical across the sector, the University

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[27] www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk

[28] University of Aberdeen, University of Dundee, Glasgow Caledonian University, Heriot-Watt University, Queen Margaret University, Robert Gordon University, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, University of St Andrews, University of Strathclyde, University of the West of Scotland

[29] University of Aberdeen, University of Dundee, University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian University, Glasgow School of Art, Heriot-Watt University, University of the Highlands and Islands, Queen Margaret University, Robert Gordon University, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Scotland's Rural College, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling, University of Strathclyde

of Aberdeen's Centre for Academic Development (CAD) plays a key role in the identification and sharing of good learning and teaching practice using a range of approaches including a yearly Academic Symposium (which is aligned to the Enhancement Themes), a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Learning and Teaching, a Good Practice Showcase, an Online Forum, and Learning and Teaching Networks.

70   Institutions present a wide range of activities to support the dissemination of practice. At the University of Dundee, there are several collaborative working groups of academic and professional services staff to address short to medium-term aspects of student experience or to amend or develop policy; at the University of Edinburgh, the Institute for Academic Development maintains a 'Teaching Matters' blog which is regularly updated with examples of innovative practice to provide a set of resources for academic staff in enhancing their teaching provision. While it is common for institutions to use their quality assurance processes to identify good practice, at Heriot-Watt University, Enhancement Workshops are incorporated into the regular Academic Review process and result in improved sharing of ideas and future actions at discipline level. Six institutions[30] have developed 'communities of practice' to enable sharing of ideas and practice among staff with common interests, representing a positive trend. At the University of Stirling, this approach has engendered an increase in the number of staff preparing applications for Advance HE fellowship.

71   In support of institutional steps to share good practice among staff, the ELIR 4 reports identified nine institutions[31] that have adopted a practice of giving awards in recognition of excellence on the part of staff in teaching or related aspects of their professional activities. There are a range of approaches to this. At Edinburgh Napier University, awards are student-led, managed and overseen by the University's Students' Association. The University of Glasgow runs two award schemes in parallel - one led by the Students' Representative Council and the other by the institution - while the University of St Andrews presents awards for outstanding teaching at an annual Teaching Excellence Award ceremony held by the Students' Association and the Principal's Office.

Supporting staff

72   There is widespread evidence (16 out of the 18 ELIR 4 reports)[32] across the sector of effective arrangements for engaging and supporting staff in the development of their learning, teaching and scholarly practices by means of a variety of policies and practices. Many institutions provide staff with, for instance, training workshops, mentoring schemes, and leadership development programmes, supportive of individual goals set in annual appraisals for members of staff. Institutions generally also provide support for staff who are new to teaching and assessment to undertake study towards suitable qualifications. Teaching staff at Glasgow School of Art can undertake the institution's Master of Education programme, comprising a suite of three different specialist routes, while at the University of Strathclyde there is a structured programme of study for staff leading to the award of a PgCert/PgDip/MSc Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.

[30] University of Dundee, University of Edinburgh, Glasgow Caledonian University, University of the Highlands and Islands, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling
[31] University of Aberdeen, University of Dundee, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh Napier University, University of Glasgow, Heriot-Watt University, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling
[32] Explicitly confirmed in all reports except for Edinburgh Napier University and Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

73   Support for academic staff by means of peer networks and peer observation of teaching is widespread. ELIR 4 reports identify nine institutions[33] in this regard, and express positive views about this support for the professional development of staff, while noting also that at least three institutions would benefit from continuing to enhance their practice in order to ensure consistent awareness and engagement by staff in their peer observation schemes. Nevertheless, reports draw attention to evidence of good practice. Queen Margaret University's 'New to Programme Leadership Network' allows programme leaders to gain a greater understanding of their role and related topics and issues. At Scotland's Rural College, the 'Professional Discussion of Learning and Teaching' procedure enables three mechanisms (developmental classroom observation, peer support of teaching, and learning walks) to support peer review of learning and teaching practice.

74   ELIR 4 reports identified seven institutions[34] as recognising excellence in teaching in the criteria for promotion of teaching staff; in addition, reports noted that two institutions provide routes to professorial posts based on teaching pathways. This feature has been a developing trend over the period since the previous ELIR 3 cycle, and was seen as a positive feature in the current ELIR 4 reports.

75   ELIR 4 reports at some institutions drew attention to the need to continue to develop mechanisms to both ensure and effectively monitor the uptake of development opportunities by staff across HEIs in order to ensure greater consistency. These related, for example, to: the consistent provision of training for postgraduate students prior to undertaking teaching on undergraduate programmes (see paragraph 55); to equity of access to development opportunities for staff across all of an institution's campuses; to pressures on staff workload; and recognition in workload allocation models of time spent on development activities. This represents an area for development.

Academic standards and quality processes

Key features of approaches to managing quality and maintaining standards

76   Institutions' arrangements for maintaining standards and ensuring the quality of their provision typically rest on a suite of quality policies, processes and procedures including annual monitoring of each programme and regular Institution-Led Review (ILR), often at intervals of six years, of all provision. These are underpinned by processes for the approval of new programmes prior to delivery and are supported by the gathering and use of internal data and by the use of external reference points including the institution's external examiners. Evidence used in both annual monitoring and ILR processes commonly includes student performance data along with student feedback gathered though the NSS and internal surveys and, in some cases, staff feedback (for example, the University of Glasgow has introduced a staff survey as part of its ILR process since its ELIR 3 review).

77   ELIR 4 reports confirmed the robustness of institutions' policies, processes and procedures for managing quality and maintaining standards, and drew attention to commendable features at nine institutions.[35] Reports provided evidence of a number of

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[33] Peer networks at Queen Margaret University, Robert Gordon University, Scotland's Rural College, University of Strathclyde, and peer observation at University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian University, Heriot-Watt University, Queen Margaret University, University of St Andrews
[34] Abertay University, University of Dundee, University of Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian University, Queen Margaret University, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling
[35] University of Aberdeen, University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow, Heriot-Watt University, University of the Highlands and Islands, Queen Margaret University, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling, University of the West of Scotland

diverse and innovative examples of positive practice, including the following examples. The University of Edinburgh was found to have adopted a highly-professional approach to supporting the participation of students in the ILR process, including centrally-delivered training. At the University of the Highlands and Islands, effective approaches to support the dissemination, implementation and embedding of the institutional quality framework across its network of 12 academic partners include well-defined institutional expectations supported by clear and accessible guidance. The University of the West of Scotland has a two-phase, contextualised ILR process that provides a supportive, reflective analysis of programmes, enabling the identification of key themes through the process. At the University of Glasgow, an all-staff survey allows staff to provide feedback on their experience of teaching, support for teaching, cultural values associated with teaching, and other activities undertaken in the area under review. An institutional commitment to enhancing learning and teaching at Heriot-Watt University is exemplified through clear and accessible policies and procedures, the establishment of the Learning and Teaching Academy and the further development of the role of Directors of Learning and Teaching in Schools.

78   The guidance from the Scottish Funding Council to HEIs on quality from August 2017-22[36] affirms that, in relation to ILRs, 'All services contributing to the student experience should be reviewed as part of an institution's approach' while acknowledging that 'It is a matter for each institution to determine how this should be done'. ELIR 4 reports identified nine institutions[37] which have not established or implemented effective arrangements for the regular internal review of the contribution of the professional support services to the quality of the student experience, and, in each case, the report recommended that the institution should do so. This is a clear area for development and prompted the instigation of the Focus On: *Professional Services Partnerships*[38] project in 2021-22. More detailed information about the findings relating to professional services review can be found on the Focus On webpage and in an accompanying Thematic Report on the topic.

Use of external reference points

79   The ELIR 4 reports confirm that all institutions make effective use of external reference points in setting standards and maintaining quality. In every institution, provision is aligned with the expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, and reports relating to five institutions explicitly state that the alignment is reviewed on a regular basis.[39] For all institutions except one, reports confirm that programme design and content are informed by the views of representative employers or of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

80   All institutions make use of external examiners in ensuring that academic standards are maintained. The ELIR 4 reports for every institution except one describe the internal arrangements for receiving, considering and responding to external examiners' annual reports; in each case the arrangements were found to be satisfactory with a single exception where the HEI did not at institutional level routinely consider an overview of external examiners' comments.

81   In most institutions, the ELIR 4 reports affirm that institutions provide information to students about the role of external examiners, as well as making their reports available to

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[36] www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/guidance_sfcgd112017/SFCGD112017-SFC-guidance-HE-institutions-quality.pdf
[37] University of Aberdeen, Abertay University, Edinburgh Napier University, University of Glasgow, Glasgow School of Art, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, University of Stirling, University of Strathclyde, University of the West of Scotland
[38] www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/focus-on/professional-services-partnerships
[39] University of Dundee, Heriot-Watt University, Queen Margaret University, Robert Gordon University, University of Strathclyde

the student body; reports typically identify this as positive practice. At four institutions, however, ELIR teams found that this does not routinely happen, and in each case made a recommendation to the institution to alter its arrangements to enable students to have access to external examiners' reports. This is therefore something of an area for development.

Use of data to inform decision-making

82   ELIR 4 reports show that, of the 18 institutions under review, 14 had effective approaches to the use of data to inform decision-making and evaluation, while three had approaches where the ELIR 4 team believed there would be benefits to the HEIs and their students in enhancing their current arrangements. The remaining institution had recently adopted new arrangements which the review team found were at too early a stage to allow a view of their effectiveness to be formed. Institutions with effective approaches typically made routine use of data to inform key quality processes including annual monitoring and Institution-Led Reviews, and also to inform the evaluation of performance based on key performance indicators (KPIs) to support the development of a shared understanding of good practice within the institution, and to be responsive to emerging issues. KPIs are commonly linked explicitly to institutional strategic and operational plans, but may also be linked to SFC Outcome Agreements (for example, in the case of Queen Margaret University) and used to help identify and share good practice.

83   Reports identified a number of particularly positive features in the use of data. At eight institutions,[40] data on student performance and achievement is routinely available to academic or professional services staff, typically through dashboards or data hubs. Four[41] of these institutions were also commended for their practice in providing data to staff in a form which enables evaluation and decision-making - a positive trend which was described by a member of staff in one institution as 'transformational' to their practice.

84   QAA Scotland commissioned an independent consultant to evaluate the impact of the 2017-20 Enhancement Theme - *Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience*. The resulting report[42] concluded that the work of the Theme made a significant contribution to creating a culture within the Scottish HE sector that utilises evidence to enhance the student experience, and that this in turn was having an impact on student experiences and outcomes. This was demonstrated through qualitative feedback, and through some of the early metrics available (most notably NSS data) in relation to specific institutions or projects. There was also evidence of sector commitment to continuing this work to extend and sustain the impact beyond the life of the Theme. The potential of Enhancement Themes to strengthen ELIR processes is illustrated in the following example, highlighted in the evaluation report. Robert Gordon University used the Theme to improve processes to support preparation for its ELIR in 2021. Recognising the importance of effective self-evaluation, it considered how evidence has increasingly become central to the identification of enhancement priorities, development of project methodology, monitoring progress, and undertaking impact evaluation. A series of semi-structured interviews facilitated reflection upon what the work of the Theme uncovered and what has subsequently changed as a result. Self-evaluation is likely to remain a foundational part of the Scottish

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[40] University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh Napier University, University of Glasgow, University of the Highlands and Islands, Queen Margaret University, Robert Gordon University, University of Strathclyde, University of the West of Scotland
[41] Edinburgh Napier University, Robert Gordon University, University of Strathclyde, University of the West of Scotland
[42] www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/ethemes/evidence-for-enhancement/evidence-for-enhancement-evaluation-report.pdf

approach to quality, and institutional capacity to use evidence to support self-evaluation, therefore, needs to be a matter of continuing interest across the sector.

85   While reports provide evidence of much good practice across the sector in the use of data to inform evaluation and enhancement, they also identify recommendations to a total of seven institutions intended to further secure their practices, suggesting that this remains an area for development. Recommendations largely relate to the need for consistency in the accessibility and coverage of data, and to the need to use data to identify and address gaps in student attainment.

Collaborative provision

Key features

86   All institutions have arrangements for collaboration with other educational or academic institutions in the delivery of programmes leading to an award of the institution. The majority of the sector's collaborative partnerships are with HEIs in other countries, largely in the Middle East or South-East Asia. At some institutions, students based at collaborative partners form a significant proportion of the institution's student population, the largest being at Queen Margaret University whom, at the time of their ELIR (April 2018), reported that 36% of students were studying at partner institutions.

87   The sector supports a variety of types of international partnership, including franchised provision, validated provision, a joint venture with a college in China and two overseas campuses. While most partnerships lead to the award of an undergraduate degree or of a taught master's degree, five institutions[43] have international partnerships leading to the award of a research degree. While many institutions have declared a strategic goal of increasing the number or scale of their transnational provision, institutions have nevertheless been ready to terminate partnerships in cases where the partners' commitment to standards or quality has been insufficient. The ELIR 4 reports show that two institutions have ended overseas partnerships for these reasons.

88   The ELIR 4 reports confirm that 13 institutions[44] have partnerships with colleges in Scotland to facilitate the progression of students to HE, thereby typically furthering the goal of widening participation by underrepresented groups in HE. This is a positive trend. There are a number of examples of positive practice in the establishment of effective progression routes; for instance: two of the campuses of the University of the West of Scotland are co-located with further education colleges, enabling work in partnership and supporting high levels of articulation to the University's programmes; the University of Stirling provides integrated degree programmes allowing direct entry from a college to Year 3 of a degree at the University; and Heriot-Watt University collaborates with colleges on curriculum, assessment and student support, enabling students to progress to the University with full credit for study at a college.

89   The ELIR 4 reports also identify instances of particularly positive practice in supporting collaborative provision. For example, at Queen Margaret University the collection of independent feedback from students studying at each of its collaborative partners through

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[43] University of Dundee, University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow, University of St Andrews, University of the West of Scotland
[44] University of Aberdeen, Abertay University, University of Dundee, Edinburgh Napier University, University of Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian University, Glasgow School of Art, Heriot-Watt University, University of the Highlands and Islands, Robert Gordon University, University of Stirling, University of Strathclyde, University of the West of Scotland

the annual Partner Organisations' Student Survey was commended, as was the effective support for students entering Glasgow School of Art through an articulation route.

Managing standards and quality

90   ELIR 4 reports confirm that every institution has an effective approach to managing its collaborative provision including arrangements for securing academic standards and enhancing the student experience. Typically, institutions maintain oversight of collaborative provision by means of the same procedures for quality assurance as are applicable to on-campus provision. However, reports also identify that the oversight of collaborative provision is an area for development, with seven institutions receiving recommendations in this area. Recommendations relate to the English language proficiency of students overseas, the maintenance of an accurate register of collaborative partners, and oversight of risks in transnational partnerships. Reports also identified positive practice in the management of collaborative provision; for example, the University of the West of Scotland was commended for its managed, consolidated approach to partnership activity, which has led to clear alignment between strategic and school priorities, and between business and academic approval.

91   During the ELIR 4 cycle, one institution received a priority action (see paragraph 28) relating to institutional oversight of collaborative activity, being asked to improve in this area to ensure that it had effective arrangements in place for identifying and mitigating academic risks. It was suggested that there would be considerable benefit in reviewing the location of responsibility at institutional level for the academic standards and quality of collaborative provision to ensure adequate oversight of key academic quality processes including approval and follow-up. It was also suggested that there would be benefit in providing greater clarification of the associate deans' roles in overseeing collaborative provision within schools. The institution's Follow-up Report (see paragraph 93) details actions taken in the year following the review to address this priority action, along with its longer-term plan to enhance processes for the approval and ongoing review of partnerships.

Conclusion

92   Our analysis of the ELIR 4 reports confirms the continuing commitment of the Scottish HE sector to enhancing the student experience during what has been a particularly challenging cycle. Institutions have generally responded swiftly to challenges such as the pandemic. It is encouraging to see positive trends since ELIR 3, including the enhanced use of technology to support learning and teaching, the enhanced use of data to evaluate the student experience, and yet greater widening of access to HE. The continuing development of previous good practice - for example, in relation to employability - is also reassuring. Alongside these positive findings, it is clear that the ELIR 4 cycle has surfaced areas for development that were also identified in previous ELIR cycles. These include assessment and feedback, collaborative provision, and the postgraduate research student experience (with particular emphasis on support for postgraduates who teach). The most notable emerging area for development is that of professional services review, and while QAA Scotland instigated sector-level support in 2021-22 through the Focus On project, it is evident that further development and support in this area would likely be welcomed.

Next steps

93   One year after publication of their ELIR Outcome and Technical Reports, institutions are asked to submit a Follow-up Report to QAA Scotland. These reports are also submitted to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). Follow-up Reports are written in the institution's own words and require to be endorsed by the institution's Governing Body prior

to publication on the QAA website. Guidance on the content and structure is provided by QAA Scotland. Institutions are asked to focus on the action they have taken since the review and to include an indication of the effectiveness of that action. ELIR 4 reports highlight positive practice as well as areas for development, and institutions are encouraged to comment on key areas of activity relating to good practice that they have prioritised since the ELIR.

94   The Scottish Funding Council's report *Coherence and Sustainability: A Review of Tertiary Education and Research*,[45] published in June 2021, recommended 'the development of a single framework for quality for colleges and universities, to uphold academic standards and secure enhancement of the learning experience of students' (p 13). QAA Scotland is working closely with SFC, along with institutions and sector agencies, to develop this framework and its component parts, including a new review method. It is intended that the framework and review method will build on what has been learned and developed over the 20 years of the Quality Enhancement Framework and ELIR.

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[45] www.sfc.ac.uk/review/review.aspx