ELIR 4 Thematic Report

Professional Services Review

September 2022

Introduction

As part of the [Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR) method](#), QAA Scotland produces regular Thematic Reports to support learning from the outcomes of individual ELIR reports. The purpose of the Thematic Reports is to inform future development work in the sector and to inform future QAA activity, including work carried out with the [Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC).](#)

QAA Scotland follows up the ELIR outcomes with institutions individually through institutional liaison visits, and each institution is required to produce a Follow-up Report indicating how it has addressed its own ELIR outcomes. QAA Scotland also promotes collaborative working between institutions to share good practice and to find collective solutions to common areas for development.

Scope and structure of the report

This report identifies material relating to Professional Services Review (PSR) contained within the ELIR reports for the 18 Scottish higher education institutions reviewed in the ELIR 4 cycle.

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

This report analyses the examples of commendations and recommendations which have been highlighted in the ELIR 4 Outcome Reports and the more detailed findings included within ELIR 4 Technical Reports. It is possible that additional practice takes place within these 18 institutions, but only those elements of practice included within the ELIR reports are included in this Thematic Report.

Sector context

The [Scottish Funding Council (SFC) guidance to higher education institutions on quality for the cycle from August 2017-2022](#) provides HEIs and stakeholders with general information on the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) and technical guidance. The guidance for the 2017-22 cycle includes the following paragraph under guidance for institution-led review:

> *Contribution and role of support services*
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> *37. All services contributing to the student experience should be reviewed as part of an institution's approach. Support services are of crucial importance in determining the overall quality of the student learning experience and can impact significantly on student achievement and well-being. It is a matter for each institution to determine how this should be done. Whatever the approach taken, the evidence should allow the institution to reflect on the contribution of support services to the 'quality culture' within the institution, the ways in which the services engage with students to monitor and improve the quality of services, and the ways in which the services promote high quality learning and continuous quality enhancement.*

For the purpose of this report, professional services are defined as any non-academic service or department that contributes to the overall student learning experience. Professional services may directly or indirectly impact the overall student learning experience. By the nature of being student facing, services such as careers, disability and welfare, library, and information technology generally have a direct impact on the student experience. In contrast, services with less direct engagement with students, such as finance, quality assurance and governance, have potential to have a significant, if indirect, impact on the student experience.

Focus On: Professional Services Partnerships

QAA Scotland's Focus On projects aim to help higher education institutions (HEIs) and students' associations with work across key priority areas. Topics are chosen in liaison with SHEEC based on findings from ELIR. Focus On provides an opportunity to explore these findings to create developmental resources and events which the whole sector can get involved with. Focus On projects are designed to be timely and practical, and help colleagues make a real difference in a short space of time.

The Focus On project for 2021-22 was Professional Services Partnerships. The project had two strands: *Understanding Methodologies and Approaches to Professional Services Review*, and *Exploring, Facilitating and Communicating Professional Services Partnerships*. Relating to the first strand of the project, the key output was a report drawing on ELIR findings along with other sources of evidence. These included: annual reports on Institution-Led Review submitted by institutions to the SFC; institutional liaison meetings conducted by QAA officers; published institutional processes (where available online); and responses to a scoping exercise designed to support the project. The report - Focus On: Professional Services Review (PSR) - serves to identify appropriate approaches and methodologies for PSR.

In contrast to the Focus On project report, this Thematic Report is based solely on practice detailed within Outcome and Technical Reports from the ELIR 4 cycle. At the time of publication of the Focus On: Professional Services Partnerships project report, the final ELIR reports had not yet been published. This report, therefore, covers a longer time period and includes more recent information than the Focus On report, though it is narrower in its evidence base.

Commendations

A key function of Thematic Reports is to highlight commendations from ELIR Outcome Reports. However, uniquely in the context of QAA's Thematic Reports across the ELIR 3

and ELIR 4 cycles, there were no commendations relating directly to PSR arising from the ELIR 4 cycle, suggesting that development and support in this area is necessary (this was the rationale for instigating the project Focus On: Professional Services Partnerships).

There are, however, four commendations that are relevant to the area of PSR which are worth noting:

- Queen Margaret University received a commendation relating to the training provided to staff and students with less experience of validation or review. This training is compulsory for students and is evaluated, with results being used to further enhance future practice.

- Robert Gordon University, the University of Strathclyde and the University of the West of Scotland were each commended for their approach to using data, including making it easily accessible to professional services, which, in turn, can inform evaluation, action planning and decision-making in these services.

While these commendations do not relate directly to PSR, they are included here as they describe practice that supports institutional PSR activity.

Recommendations

Nine institutions received recommendations relating to PSR:

University of Aberdeen

Review of professional services - continue with its plans to develop processes for the routine review of student-facing professional services. The University should ensure that the new processes link effectively to the existing Internal Teaching Review process for academic areas, allow for institutional oversight, fully engage students, and incorporate appropriate externality.

Abertay University

Review of professional services - continue with its plans to revise and implement a process for reviewing student-facing professional services to ensure a continuous, systematic review of services from academic year 2022-23. The University should ensure that the new processes link effectively to the existing institution-led review process for academic areas, allowing for institutional oversight, fully engages students, and incorporates appropriate externality.

Edinburgh Napier University

Approach to institution-led review - progress with the implementation of revisions to the institution-led review process which are likely to provide greater institutional oversight of the process and consistency in considering outcomes, including ensuring that appropriate action is taken at institutional level. The University is asked to ensure that the current institutional approach to reviewing postgraduate study considers more fully the wider student learning experience beyond student progression. There would also be benefit in the University ensuring it includes an appropriate level of externality and considering the extent to which the method will continue to be fit-for-purpose as postgraduate research student numbers grow. In addition, the University is asked to establish a systematic and timely mechanism for reviewing the contribution of the professional support services to the quality of the student experience.

University of Glasgow

Review of student-facing professional services - establish a systematic and timely mechanism to review the contribution of the professional support services to the quality of the student experience.

Glasgow School of Art

Review of student-facing professional support services - implement a systematic and effective mechanism for reviewing the contribution of the professional support services to the quality of the student experience, incorporating external specialist expertise and student engagement.

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

Approach to evaluation and review - reflect on the approach to self-evaluation and review to ensure the Conservatoire is able to optimise the learning from its review activity while streamlining the burden of conducting multiple reviews.

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University of Stirling

Review of student-facing professional services - introduce a process for reviewing student-facing professional services that complements the current process of annual review, drawing on existing good practice in its approach to the institution-led review of its academic provision. This review process should ensure input from internal stakeholders - including students and external specialist expertise, be enhancement-led and provide appropriate oversight to support the University to evaluate the contribution of these services to the quality of the student experience.

University of Strathclyde

Review of professional services - pursue the University's intention to implement a process for reviewing the professional services which contribute to the student experience. The University is strongly encouraged to make demonstrable progress within the next academic year.

University of the West of Scotland

Review of student-facing professional services - introduce a process to review the contribution of student-facing professional services to the quality of the student experience. The University should draw on existing good practice in the University's approach to institution-led review of its academic provision. Reviewing these services will be particularly useful in the context of the University having conducted its 'rebalancing' exercise.

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It is clear that institutions are at varying stages of progress in relation to PSR. Six institutions, at the time of their review, did not have processes in place at all (in which cases they were asked to introduce processes); two had plans in place to develop processes (in which cases they were asked to continue this work).

Approaches to Professional Services Review

The Focus On: Professional Services Review (PSR) report identifies two broad approaches to PSR that were in evidence during the ELIR 4 cycle: *integrated reviews* (where professional services are represented or considered to varying extents in the ILR of a subject area or cognate group of programmes), and *targeted reviews* (where an institution focuses review activity on one or more specific professional service(s), department(s) or unit(s)).

Based on the content of the ELIR 4 Technical Reports, the predominant approach in Scottish HEIs at present, appears to be targeted reviews. Examples of integrated approaches include the University of Aberdeen's Internal Teaching Review and Glasgow Caledonian University's Enhancement-led Institutional Subject Review Reports. Examples of targeted approaches include the University of Edinburgh's Student Support Services Annual Review, Robert Gordon University's Student-Facing Support Services Review, the University of Stirling's reviews of cross-institutional activity on themes such as induction, orientation and transition, and the University of the Highlands and Islands' Student Support Services Review.

It should be noted that the terms 'integrated' and 'targeted' are used here to describe these broad approaches, and may not reflect the language used by institutions in their description of their approaches. It should also be noted that, at the time of the ELIR 4 reviews, current approaches are under review, or actively being developed, in several institutions. Heriot-Watt University's Academic-Related Professional Services Review process was put on hold in 2019 pending completion of 'Building Our Commonality' -

a significant strategic project aimed at the transformation of service provision within the global institution, whether those services are provided centrally or at school level.

The remit of the University of Glasgow's recently established Student Experience Committee includes responsibility for determining how to progress with the ongoing review of student support services and the effectiveness of the Student and Academic Services Directorate. Key areas of focus identified by the Committee are likely to determine the themes of future PSRs at the institution. 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.

Enhancements resulting from PSR

While the ELIR 4 reports suggest that approaches to undertaking PSR is an area of challenge for the sector, it is important to note that the processes that are in place are, however, resulting in enhancement to student services. The University of the Highlands and Islands operates a targeted Student Support Service Review process that has resulted in demonstrable enhancements, particularly in the areas of student mental wellbeing and the University Library. In relation to student mental wellbeing, the institution has: created a regional post of Mental Health and Counselling Manager (MHCM); developed a Student Mental Health Strategy; partnered with the Highlands and Islands Students' Association (HISA) on a Student Mental Health Agreement; launched a 'Green Button' online counselling service; launched a mental health toolkit; invested in an online mental health support platform 'TogetherAll'; co-invested with HISA in an out-of-hours crisis telephone service; produced new resources for postgraduate researchers on mental health; created two part-time student mental health officers; and used additional SFC investment to recruit counsellors. In relation to the Library, the University has: re-established the post of University Librarian; formalised the role of Subject Network Librarians; adopted a variety of technologies; established a 'Live Chat' service to respond to student queries; and abolished late return fines. Students have responded positively to these enhancements: the Technical Report outlines positive National Student Survey (NSS) (2021) results in relation to these services, both quantitative (the institution scored 21% higher than the Scottish average in students' confidence that the institution had taken steps to support their mental health in the NSS 2021 COVID-19 related questions) and qualitative (positive free text comments related to the help and support received from library staff). The NSS and Postgraduate Taught and Postgraduate Research Experience Surveys (PTES and PRES) also highlighted challenges, relating mainly to library space, and the institution's Library Practitioner Group has formulated an action plan to address these.

Activity that supports PSR

The following are offered as examples of activity which may support and strengthen institutional PSR processes, though they may not necessarily actively be part of those processes, as each institution has flexibility within the SFC guidance to develop its own approach to undertaking PSR.

Use of data and evidence

Nine ELIR 4 Technical Reports include details of how professional services make use of data and evidence, including student feedback. In some instances, it is stated clearly how that data is used in review processes - for example, Robert Gordon University's Annual Appraisal Process and thematic Student-Facing Support Services Review are informed by

data from a variety of sources including survey results, NSS and student feedback from the Student Voice Forum, the Student AGM, sabbatical officers and student representatives.

At other institutions, the ELIR 4 reports comment on specific steps being taken to address gaps in professional services' access to student feedback. This includes Edinburgh Napier University's 'Student Closeness Groups' (informal consultation forums) and the use of internal and external surveys by professional services at Queen Margaret University. Elsewhere, professional services have access to standard institutional data: at Glasgow Caledonian University this includes student feedback on modules and services and external examiner feedback; and at Glasgow School of Art this includes the Student Experience Action Tracker (SEAT). At the University of St Andrews, the Planning Office works with professional services, as well as schools, to enhance the portfolio of institutional data.

As noted in the Commendations section earlier in this report, Robert Gordon University, the University of Strathclyde and the University of the West of Scotland each received commendations relating to the use of data. In the case of the University of Strathclyde, the 'Learner Experience Framework (LEF)' draws together information from a number of sources into a range of indicators and enables the University to evaluate the balance and characteristics of each programme against a set of identified and desired learning opportunities. Retention and progression data derived from the LEF is available through the Strathclyde University Business Intelligence Reports and Dashboards (SUnBIRD). The data collated, and its subsequent analysis, requires contributions and responses from professional services as well as academic departments. The University of the West of Scotland's commendation does not explicitly mention professional services staff, but the Technical Report makes clear that the approach to using data across all areas of activity, including professional services, was viewed as positive and effective.

Annual monitoring

Annual monitoring is an integral part of most institutions' planning and resourcing and quality cycles, and several ELIR 4 Technical Reports include detail of how professional services are included in these cycles. At Abertay University, professional services are required to produce annual reports that are considered by the institution's Academic Quality and Standards Committee; at Glasgow School of Art, professional services report annually on their services as part of the Programme Monitoring and Annual Reporting process; and the University of Stirling conducts an annual monitoring and planning process that results in the annual Professional Services Leadership Plan.

It is important to note that annual monitoring, as a standalone approach to review, does not fulfil the SFC expectation in relation to PSR. However, it can be used to inform PSR activity. For example, at the University of Edinburgh, student-facing professional services undergo Student Support Services Annual Review, reports from which are considered by the Senate Quality Assurance Committee. Findings from this process are used to influence the selection of topics for periodic thematic review. The process contributes to the effective evaluation and evolution of themes involving multiple services and periodic review of services to date have included Support for Disabled Students, Mental Health Services, Support for Mature Students and Student Parents and Carers, and BAME Students' Experiences of Support at the University.

Conclusion

Based on the number of ELIR recommendations (and absence of commendations) in this area, it is evident that further development and support in PSR would be welcomed by HEIs and the sector. Common challenges evident in the recommendations include institutional oversight, student engagement and externality - all of which are addressed in the Focus On: Professional Services Review report.

What is less clear is why this appears to be such a challenging area for institutions. As with institution-led review, a prescriptive approach to the development of this practice would not necessarily be supportive; however, there is potentially a need for more detailed guidance. It is possible that the development and implementation of PSR processes has been a lower priority than other quality assurance and enhancement activities, and the restructuring of professional service departments may also be a factor.

Institutions would no doubt benefit from further sector-wide opportunities to share practice in this area. There would also be benefit in further research to enhance understanding of the enablers and barriers to developing effective PSR processes.

As highlighted in this report, there is evidence that PSR is enhancing the student experience where it is working well, along with evidence of positive practice relating to reviewer training, the use of data, and student engagement (through co-chairing of committees with oversight of PSR). That positive examples have emerged late in the ELIR cycle may hint at sector progress in this area, and illustrate the value of PRS processes in enhancing the student experience and supporting institutional strategy.

Reflective questions for institutions

The following reflective questions have been developed to provide a practical resource to institutions when developing or reviewing their processes for PSR. The questions are not meant to be exhaustive. Further guidance may be found in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education - Advice and Guidance: Monitoring and Evaluation.

Broad approaches to Professional Services Review

- Does your approach to PSR take account of all professional services that contribute to the overall student learning experience?
- To what extent does your approach to PSR facilitate enhancement of the learning experience for all students?

Strategic principles for PSR

- How does your approach to PSR align with and address institutional strategic priorities?
- Does the process for PSR include evaluation activities to ensure continued effectiveness in enhancing the student experience and meeting strategic priorities?

Institutional oversight

- Where does responsibility for oversight of PSR processes sit within the institution?
- Does PSR oversight facilitate ongoing alignment with strategic priorities and support the effective dissemination of outcomes and subsequent action planning?

Review process and procedures

- Is the process for reviewing professional services defined, clear and systematic?
- How well are the process and procedures for PSR articulated and shared? What training and development is offered by the institution to support both students and staff to effectively engage in the process?

Externality

- To what extent is externality used in Professional Services Review?
- Is externality appropriate in terms of specialist expertise for PSR?

Use of data and evidence

- What data and evidence are used in PSR to support critical self-evaluation?
- How do you ensure data and evidence that is used in PSR takes account of the diversity of your student population and is appropriate to the range of professional services provided?
- How do you ensure those undertaking Professional Services Review balance the consideration of quantitative and qualitative data?

Student engagement in PSR

- Does the PSR process enable effective consideration of the student voice?
- Does the method of PSR allow for student engagement at all stages of the process?
- How do you measure the effectiveness of student engagement with PSR?

Outcomes of reviews

- To what extent are the outcomes and resultant actions from PSR used to enhance the wider student experience?
- How are the outcomes of PSR communicated to staff, students and stakeholders?