

Thematic Report on Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) Reports 2013-16: Employability and Graduate Attributes

Overview

In this report we highlight good practice and areas for development as featured in the ELIR Outcome and Technical Reports 2013-16. The key findings emerging from Outcome Reports in relation to **employability and graduate attributes** were:

Activity to promote good practice

- **Promoting employability and graduate attributes** - At Aberdeen University, the arrangements for promoting employability and delivering the Aberdeen Graduate Attributes in the undergraduate curriculum are systematic and have brought about a range of enhancements to the student experience. Development of the Aberdeen Graduate Attributes was central to the new curriculum and it is evident that considerable thought has been given to their careful embedding. Support for this is provided through a range of measures, such as staff support provided by the Centre for Academic Development. A clear focus on employability is achieved through the systematic contribution of the programme advisory boards, through which employers can influence and engage with the Graduate Attributes and programme design and delivery.
- **Graduate attributes** - The Abertay Attributes are fully embedded in the curriculum and are closely linked to Abertay University's strategic priorities. The Attributes are widely recognised by students and staff, and provide a focus for promoting and supporting the development of students' skills and experience inside and outside of the curriculum.
- **Employability** - The University of Dundee provides a comprehensive range of opportunities for students to develop their employability skills. During the review, students commented positively about the range and relevance of the initiatives provided, including the Enterprise Gym and the Placement Base.
- **Systematic approach to promoting and embedding graduate attributes** - The University of Edinburgh has systematically embedded graduate attributes throughout the undergraduate and taught postgraduate curricula and has a proactive approach to providing imaginative opportunities for students to develop graduate attributes through the co-curriculum. In particular, the Edinburgh Award provides a flexible framework for all students to gain recognition for their achievements in a wide range of areas, including academic, sporting, volunteering and work-based activities. The Edinburgh Award is highly regarded by staff and students and is being taken up by increasing numbers of students.
- **Graduate attributes** - The University of Glasgow's arrangements for delivering graduate attributes are systematic, and the role of Graduate Attribute Champion in each college is an effective mechanism for ensuring that graduate attributes are embedded into the curriculum. There is effective monitoring of the embedding of graduate attributes through the annual monitoring and periodic subject review processes.

- **Clear focus on employability** - Employability skills and graduate attributes are embedded in Glasgow Caledonian University's Strategy for Learning curriculum design principles, which drive curriculum development and delivery. The University has strong links with business and industry, which benefit its students. The commitment to employability is supported by the GCU Personal, Professional, Academically informed, Consolidated, Transactional (PPACT) standard of academic advising. This standard ensures each student engages with employability skills and related opportunities that are appropriate to their study and career ambitions.
- **Employability** - Since the 2010 ELIR, Glasgow School of Art has made significant progress in bringing together a number of projects to embed employability across the institution. The recently appointed Student Employability and Enterprise Manager is likely to support the development of a strategic approach to employability.
- **Employability** - There is a strong commitment to promoting student employability at Queen Margaret University. Work-related learning is embedded within the curriculum, and there is positive employer engagement. Support and opportunities for developing employment-related skills are provided by the Careers and Student Employability services.
- **Employability and approaches to work-related experience** - Robert Gordon University has a network of established and embedded relationships with employers and PSRBs. These links complement the curriculum, are recognised and valued by staff and students, and form the basis of embedded and diverse opportunities for work-related experience. Of particular note is the University's Talen Exchange initiative, which aims to wide work-related experience opportunity by connecting local business and organisations, specifically Small to Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), with students and staff.
- **Graduate attributes and employability** - At the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, students are encouraged in the development of graduate attributes through the range of opportunities for them to engage in professional settings within and outside the formal programmes, and by being treated as professionals from their arrival at the institution. The Conservatoire is highly supportive of students who gain relevant employment during their study, adopting a variety of flexible approaches to ensure students can complete their intended awards.
- **Holistic approach to developing employability skills** - At Scotland's Rural College, students are supported to develop vocationally relevant skills and awareness of employability, drawing on staff consultancy, professional practice and research. Student employability is also promoted through the applied nature of the curricula and the provision of work experience opportunities.
- **Graduate identity and co-curriculum** - Staff and students share a strong sense of a University of St Andrews graduate identity. This is underpinned by a varied and imaginative set of co-curricular opportunities that are provided to students, including internships, sports activities and engagement with the University community.

Areas for development

- **Employability** - The Glasgow School of Art should continue to develop, implement and embed a strategic approach to employability across the institution, ensuring that students can articulate a range of employability skills when they graduate.
- **Graduate attributes** - The University of the Highlands and Islands should continue to work with programme teams to ensure that students and staff have greater awareness of the University's defined set of graduate attributes.

- **Embedding graduate attributes in curriculum design** - The University of Strathclyde should make more explicit reference to the University's redefined graduate attributes (the 4Es - engaged; enterprising; enquiring; and ethically, culturally and globally aware) in the development of the new online Course and Class Approval Process. This would ensure that the graduate attributes are embedded in the curriculum and would promote student awareness of their importance in learning and teaching.
- **Implementing strategy for work-related learning** - In order to make demonstrable progress with targets outlined in the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy, the University of the West of Scotland should include a wider variety of opportunities for assessed work-related learning for all students, especially those in non-professional areas, and make certain that students are aware of these opportunities.
- **Visibility of graduate attributes** - The University of the West of Scotland should progress its plans to ensure the visibility of graduate attributes to students both through its work on personal development planning and through the promotion and use of graduate attributes in module descriptors, programme specifications and learning outcomes.

Introduction

As part of the ELIR 3 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, in particular, to inform future QAA activity including work carried out in collaboration with the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC).

Scope and structure of this report

This report identifies material relating to employability and graduate attributes contained within the ELIR reports for all 18 Scottish higher education institutions reviewed in the ELIR 3 cycle (2013-16). The institutions included in this report are: the University of Aberdeen; Abertay University; the University of Dundee; the University of Edinburgh; Edinburgh Napier University; Glasgow School of Art; Glasgow Caledonian University; the University of Glasgow; Heriot-Watt University; the University of the Highlands and Islands; Queen Margaret University; Robert Gordon University; the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland; Scotland's Rural College (SRUC); the University of St Andrews; the University of Stirling; the University of Strathclyde and the University of the West of Scotland.

This report summarises examples of positive practice and areas for development as highlighted in the ELIR Outcome Reports (see pages 1-3), and the more detailed findings included within the ELIR Technical Reports (see below). It is possible that additional practice takes place in these 18 institutions, but only those elements of practice included within the ELIR reports are included here. The report then outlines briefly the next steps in the ELIR process following the publication of the reports.

The annex includes references to employability and graduate attributes within the ELIR Technical Reports. The paragraph numbers used in the annex are taken directly from the original reports.

Areas highlighted in the ELIR Thematic Reports

In ELIR 3, each Outcome Report sets out the ELIR team's views of positive practice and areas for development at the institution. These key findings in relation to employability and graduate attributes are summarised on pages 1-3 of this report. This section identifies current interesting practice at the 18 institutions as identified in the longer ELIR Technical Reports.

Activity to promote good practice

Policy and strategy

The ELIR reports recognise that many higher education institutions have developed policies and strategies on employability and graduate attributes. The University of Aberdeen has Employability Action Plans at school and discipline level, with course approval processes now requiring the explicit identification of graduate attributes. The University also has an Employability Framework in place that aligns with its Learning and Teaching Operational Plan. Abertay University's Employability Strategy 2015-20 outlines the University's strategic approach to employability and professional development for students. The Strategy is supported by the Abertay Attributes, the institution's graduate attributes framework. The University's Teaching and Learning Enhancement Strategy also links to the University's strategies for employability.

The University of Dundee has employability, enterprise and entrepreneurship as one of the two cross-cutting themes in its University Strategy to 2017. Glasgow School of Art has recently appointed a Student Employability and Enterprise Manager, who is likely to support the development of a strategic approach to employability. The University of Glasgow's Learning and Teaching Plan includes graduate attributes as a high-level project and there is a reference to graduate attributes in each college's learning and teaching plan. SRUC has developed a Learner Engagement Strategy, which aims to improve students' employability and to support the development of graduate attributes. As part of Edinburgh Napier University's Strategy 2020 it has committed resources to support students in developing entrepreneurial skills and graduate attributes relating to knowledge, learning, citizenship and the world of work.

Glasgow Caledonian University has a strategic commitment to reviewing and developing the curriculum to place an emphasis on graduate attributes and employability. At the University of the Highlands and Islands, the Strategic Plan identifies clear aspirations regarding employability and includes a critical performance indicator based on Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) outcomes for graduates. Furthermore, the University has an employer engagement strategy, UHI Work and Enterprise, which intends to explicitly complement Academic Partner employer networks. The University has also employed a Student Placement Policy to guide institutional activities around work-based learning. Robert Gordon University's strategic aspirations regarding employability are related within the University's Employability Plus @ RGU strategy, which also links to the University's strategic plan. At the University of St Andrews, seven key strategic themes known as the Proctor's Priorities have been identified - one of which is 'improving employability'.

Embedding graduate attributes

Most of the reviewed institutions are identified as having taken a proactive approach to embedding a clear set of graduate attributes in their curricula or within wider practice. The University of Aberdeen has developed 19 Aberdeen Graduate Attributes (AGAs), on which staff receive training, and all new programmes at the University have to demonstrate how they will aid the development of AGAs. Abertay University developed the Abertay

Attributes on employability and enterprise in 2015-16. The Abertay Attributes are fully embedded within the University's curriculum and are closely linked to the University's strategic priorities. Both students and staff demonstrate clear understanding of the Attributes within the curriculum. The University of Dundee has developed workshops for support staff that provide information on graduate attributes. The University of Glasgow has a Graduate Attributes Champion in each college to ensure the attributes are embedded within the curriculum. Queen Margaret University encourages students to engage with placements and community activities to promote specific graduate attributes. The University of Strathclyde calls its graduate attributes the 4Es, which stand for: engaged; enterprising; enquiring; and ethically, culturally and globally aware.

The University of Edinburgh has its own Graduate Attributes Framework; graduate attributes in the curriculum are systematically considered through the course development and approval, annual monitoring and periodic review processes. SRUC and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland have also made steps to embed graduate attributes into their respective curricula. 'Standout' is the overarching brand used by Edinburgh Napier University to describe the programme of events, support and advice offered to students to support them in developing graduate attributes and employability skills, while the 'Bright Red Triangle' aims to give students experience of real-world business issues. Embedding graduate attributes was highlighted as an area of positive practice at Glasgow Caledonian University.

Heriot-Watt University has re-developed its graduate attributes following a review that identified a lack of awareness among staff and students about graduate attributes. The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) has re-developed its graduate attributes following a consultation with students and employers on the relevance of the initial UHI graduate attributes. The University plans to work with the Careers and Employability Centre to progress work in the area of graduate attributes. Robert Gordon University does not have a set of institution-level graduate attributes, and attributes are articulated programme level in order to ensure relevance to students. The University of Stirling has indicated that it is now focusing on embedding graduate attributes in the curriculum.

Employer engagement

Several institutions have innovative methods of engaging with employers that has been recognised in the ELIR reports. Abertay University's Employability Strategy 2015-20 dictates that all programmes should feature employer engagement in delivery. Queen Margaret University uses employers on programme review and validation panels. The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland enables students to participate in modules that involve collaboration with peers and professionals in other disciplines. In addition, where students in their third year of study have been offered employment in their chosen profession, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland has taken active steps to enable students to complete their academic award. At SRUC, programme teams have close links with industry throughout the development of the curriculum and in its delivery.

At the University of Aberdeen, employers are able to make a significant contribution to the development of the curriculum through their membership of programme approval boards. The University of the Highlands and Islands works closely with employers in a range of industry sectors and aims to offer vocationally-relevant curricula across all levels. Furthermore, the University engages in discussions with relevant employers during periodic subject and service reviews. Robert Gordon University has an appropriate range of links to and with employers and PSRBs, which are highly valued by its students and staff. Through the institution's developed employer network, Robert Gordon University offers a range of work-related learning experiences via the University's Talent Exchange programme.

The University of Edinburgh has an external Employer Advisory Group that comprises senior employers from a range of backgrounds, and the requirements of relevant employers and industry bodies are considered when new programmes seek approval. Glasgow Caledonian University has a well-established strategic partnership with industry and professional bodies aimed at developing employability and graduate attributes. Students at Heriot-Watt University recognise that industry links developed by the University were effective and beneficial to the academic community. At the University of Strathclyde, students at the Business School develop marketing strategies for external clients (who are actual employers). The University also has one collaboration with an industrial partner to provide research degree programmes for the partner's employees through a combination of work-based learning and joint professional and academic research supervision. The University is discussing the initiation of similar programmes with other industrial partners.

Careers services

Abertay University's Career Service supports the University's Principle's Award, a year-long student development programme that includes work experience, reflective learning and professional development workshops. The award is recognised as part of students' Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR). The University of Dundee is planning to establish a new employability, enterprise and entrepreneurship hub, which will be a physical centre comprising the Careers Service, and aspects of Research and Innovation Services. The hub would also include Dundee's Enterprise Gym, an enterprise programme running at the University, which brings students and successful business people together throughout the academic year. The Technical Report relating to the review of SRUC highlighted that the institution holds a successful annual careers convention for students.

The Careers and Employability Centre at the University of the Highlands and Islands provides support for careers and placement services, a range of events such as the employability week, annual seminars, and more. Students who are unable to attend in person also benefit from a significant online resources and e-guidance support. The Careers Service at the University of St Andrews offers support such as CV development, and job search and support for placement and internships. At the University of Stirling, the Careers and Employability Service has developed a series of workshops, known as Lift Off, to provide students with a confidence toolkit to develop their lifelong employability skills.

Work-based learning opportunities

The ways in which the institutions facilitate placements and other work-based learning opportunities are recognised. The University of Dundee has a Placement Base, which is a 'one-stop shop' for work experience. At the University of Glasgow, the development of a work placement policy was informed by successful initiatives in response to the Graduates for the 21st Century (G21C) Enhancement Theme, including a work placement initiative in the creative industries introduced by staff in one school. At Queen Margaret University academic staff encourage students to engage with placements and community activities. Placements are also built into many of Queen Margaret University's programmes, with their careers service providing support for students applying.

The University of the Highlands and Islands has a Student Placement Policy and guidance that articulates the responsibilities of students and employers. Robert Gordon University's Talent Exchange programme offers undergraduate and postgraduate students the opportunity to undertake placements of varying lengths, as well as short consultancy projects with local SMEs. The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland treats its students as professional practitioners upon their arrival, and many of their programmes include work placements or similar opportunities. The University of Edinburgh has developed on-campus

internships for students and appointed a Community Engagement Officer to develop outreach opportunities at scale for students. Edinburgh Napier University is developing online services, such as virtual internship fairs for the benefit of distance learning students. A range of internship opportunities are provided to students from the University of St Andrews, and around 57 per cent of undergraduates undertake some form of internship before graduating. The University of the West of Scotland's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy 2011-15 indicated that all students on award-bearing programmes would be given the opportunity to engage in assessed work-related learning.

Learning and teaching approaches

The University of Strathclyde promotes Vertically Integrated Projects, which provide students at all levels of study with an opportunity to work with staff in multidisciplinary teams on research and development projects. The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland also offers opportunities for vertical learning as students from different years often perform alongside professional practitioners, for example as members of an orchestra. At Glasgow Caledonian University, classroom and technology-based approaches are combined to develop student workplace and life skills. The University of the West of Scotland has School Enhancement Developers who devise and implement initiatives to support progression, retention and employability within a school.

Co-curricular activities

The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland has recognised the value of providing guidance to help students in their selection of co-curricular activities to ensure they are able to gain as much benefit as possible from the rich variety of opportunities that are available. Students graduating from the University of Aberdeen from 2014 onwards will receive an Enhanced Graduate Transcript, which will record their co-curricular achievements. The University of Edinburgh has implemented the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) to recognise students' co-curricular activities, alongside their own 'Edinburgh Award', which the ELIR team considered to be a particularly positive approach. Abertay University has fully engaged with the HEAR and currently offers over 100 verifiable achievements to students.

Postgraduate

The University of Edinburgh has targets and plans for increasing postgraduate student numbers, which include providing more sources of employment for postgraduate research students on campus as an incentive to potential applicants. Robert Gordon University provides postgraduate students with the opportunity to take part in the University's Talent Exchange programme, which provides opportunities for students to get involved in short term consultancy projects with local SMEs or longer term placements. At Heriot-Watt University, the Centre for Academic Leadership and Development provides a variety of skills and career development activities for research students. The University of Stirling introduced an interactive skills development and skills training system for its postgraduate research student community. The University of Stirling participated in the 'Making the Most of Masters' initiative, which worked to provide the opportunity for work-based dissertations at master's level. The University of the West of Scotland has embedded graduate attributes for research students into the learning experience.

Student partnership

Glasgow Caledonian University's Students' Association has a leadership and employability award designed to develop the leadership, communication and teamwork skills of students. The ELIR report for Heriot-Watt University noted the partnership working between the University and the Students' Union in carrying out work jointly on graduate attributes. It was

also noted that the Students' Union has taken the lead in training school officers on the new graduate attributes in order to engage the student body. At the University of St Andrews, the Students' Association has run a number of professional skills workshops and activities for students, which are recognised on the students' degree transcripts. There is also a St Andrews Award, which is being reviewed by the Students' Association to increase its flexibility and accessibility for a wider proportion of the student population.

Areas for development

While there were examples of positive practice relating to employability and graduate attributes provided in the ELIR Technical Reports, a number of areas for development were also identified.

This section of the paper outlines the areas for development identified relating to employability and graduate attributes in a higher education institution in the ELIR Technical Reports. There are areas of overlap between the issues highlighted below.

Policy and strategy

Students at Glasgow School of Art were not able to articulate the transferable skills they were developing as a result of the practice-based curriculum. At the time of the ELIR, Glasgow School of Art was working with Buckinghamshire New University on a Higher Education Academy funded project.

Embedding graduate attributes

While almost all institutions had made efforts to embed graduate attributes, a number of ELIR reports identified that students were not always aware of their institutions' graduate attributes. Glasgow School of Art, SRUC, Edinburgh Napier University, the University of Strathclyde and the University of the West of Scotland have identified a need to raise awareness of graduate attributes and to further embed them within the curriculum. The ELIR Technical Report concluded that the University of the Highlands and Islands would benefit from increasing the visibility of attributes to both staff and students, and noted that currently staff and students were not always aware of them. The identification of a more comprehensive graduate attributes framework at the University of St Andrews was still in progress at the time of the ELIR. At the University of Stirling it was noted that, although work had begun, there could be a more comprehensive framework for the development of all graduate attributes through the University's curricular and co-curricular provision.

Careers services

SRUC currently does not have a central careers guidance service. The institution was asked to explore options for providing generic careers support to students, and to keep this under review to ensure the effectiveness of arrangements for students on all campuses. At St Andrews some students commented that the University's Careers Service could provide additional support for postgraduates and for students who were seeking employment in countries outside the UK.

Work-based learning opportunities

The Technical Report relating to the review of the University of the Highlands and Islands' notes that not all students have placement opportunities, and that some staff are unclear about the content of the Student Placement Policy. Students at Heriot-Watt University recognised that, in some subject areas and disciplines, work-related learning experiences were difficult to obtain. At the University of St Andrews, students studying on science programmes expressed a desire for greater engagement with industry. The Technical Report

relating to the review of the University of the West of Scotland indicated that it should facilitate more work-based learning opportunities for students in non-professional areas.

Co-curricular activities

It was noted that, at the University of St Andrews, mature students found it challenging to engage in co-curricular activities due to other life commitments; this was especially true if they lived a distance from University facilities.

Postgraduate

Postgraduate students at Glasgow School of Art commented that they received very little employability training. The School was asked to ensure it has sufficient capacity for the support and enhancement of the research student experience and to provide sufficient opportunities for research students to gain teaching experience. Postgraduate students at the University of St Andrews said that it was difficult to engage with the wider elements of University life due to their academic workload, and a small number of research students said that the University focused more on developing them as researchers and preparing them for future roles in research and academia rather than for employment outside higher education. The Technical Report relating to the review of the University of St Andrews also recommended that the institution should monitor the success of the targeted support for international students that the Careers Service provides.

What happens next?

QAA Scotland follows up the ELIR outcomes with institutions individually through annual discussion 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. Each institution is invited to participate in a follow-up event to engage with the ways other institutions that were reviewed at around the same point of the ELIR cycle have addressed their review outcomes.

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QAA1887 - Jun 17

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

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